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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE RAT HOLE

BY

DAVID BRUNDAGE ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1994

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled

THE RAT HOLE

submitted by DAVID BRUNDAGE

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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THE RAT HOLE

One by one, we state our names. He strokes his goatee and listens. Soon he's reciting: all 26, in perfect order. Murmurs of approval ripple through the big room.

Impress, if you dare. Bully or be bullied.

A trace of smugness escapes from Dr. Bindek's eyes as he reviews the rows of uniforms. Navy pants with the typical red stripes; gray epaulette shirts, navy trim with register numbers across our hearts-- four digit, rookie, three digit, vet. Dr. Bindek says for tomorrow's feat we'll tell him our numbers and he'll recite *them*.

They say this teacher knows his stuff. To hear anything good about a workshop, especially one taught by a stoop-shouldered civilian with complicated overheads (too damn much university education) -- well, it's amazing.

We're minus gun belts; no gun belts inside, no gun belts in workshops. Dr. Bindek says he's reassured -- we can't shoot the teacher.

Everyone snickers.

Still, for us outside types it's going to be a long week. You can already cut the tension from the smokers. After our move into new headquarters ten years ago, anti-smoking warfare escalated. With cutbacks, fewer of us patrol in pairs; but fights between smoking and non-smoking partners have only increased. A constable, two rows over, slapped his last partner across the face. An acting sergeant, no less. Last year, headquarters went smoke-free. We've never had an issue this hot. It's all the same to me. I care more about the lack of windows throughout the new building. Snipers, once a possibility, are now considered a probability.

"They prefer us to die a slow death," I told Katie, my current patrol partner.

So I *imagine* staring out the window.

Some view:

The Empire Hotel, haunt of drug deals, knifings, desperation. A man lies in the doorway, ass on the stoop, head on the cement. Don't sleep with your head below your feet, they told us campers at Napawingue. The blood fills your skull till it bursts.

Woman in a torn cloth coat limps by, hunched against the cold, dragging a bundle buggy, one wheel missing. She stoops to snag a cigarette butt.

There's snow everywhere. Behind the fluttering veil, a shadow descends. With bubble head and trailing cord, it reminds me of the foetus submarining before its umbilical cord in our grade nine biology book. Except this foetus is falling feet first.

It touches. It has legs, and clunky feet. It crosses the white wasteland with high strides, exaggerated, slow-mo, like someone used to walking only on the ocean floor. A second shadow slinks high-stepping behind the first, holding a flag. Blinding snow blurs the design. The bubbleheads stop and lunge downwards, impaling the ground with their faceless banner.

They placed new headquarters on the strip. The Mayor gave his speech at opening ceremonies under the flagpole, then got the hell out. Old Boyle Street. Skid Row for those that don't know Edmonton. The better to keep an eye on the scene. A young woman, working the street, rocks on the hood of a parked car, legs dangle, eyes on the ground. What else to look at here in October -- no leaves, no color, no snow. The car owner approaches, little goose step, brief case jouncing; he waves her away like a trace of body odor.

Exhausted, my mind returns to class. Just in time for a story.

Dr. Bindek knows his cops. He tells about a couple, ninety years old, who go to a divorce arbitrator. "What makes you plan a divorce at this point," the man asks. The couple answer in tandem: "the kids have died."

"Yee-na!" squeals Buddy.

"Goddam!" cries Jamie Meegan. "Sorry dad," he adds.

"All right!" shouts the junior camp director, Mr. Firth

Whistles.

We're sitting in a semicircle around the Rev. Meegan's black and white RCA Victor, boys on the floor, adults on chairs and chesterfield. Through the living room window, arrowheaded pine trees sway in the evening breeze. This is forbidden. After breakfast in the dining hall, Mr. Merrit announced that today was a huge day in the history of mankind. Then he read all our names from the roll -- seven years to fifteen -- assigning us to specially provided TVs in various lodges, offices and facilities. Many of us older ones got to enter the inner sanctum of some senior staff member. My section scored cottages on Senior Staff Hill, commonly known as SS lookout -- the most forbidden of forbidden territory in Camp Napawingue. Rev. Meegan's cottage cannot challenge Mr. Van Castle's winterized fortress, but still we have much to lord over the younger boys.

Walter Cronkite, whom we love to imitate on entertainment night, is blinking through the snow. "A giant step for mankind ..." he intones as Rev. Meegan snaps off the TV.

"Pity about all that static," he says.

"It's the Laurentians, Dad," says Jamie. "What do you expect?"

"Okay boys," Mr. Firth shouts in his football coach voice, "back to your tents."

No one dares protest.

I shouldn't be here at all. This class is for the the hard-core. Stress management for the walking wounded, the shell-shocked. I feel guilty. What have I to compare? Three were in shootouts. One took a life. Another found her partner after he turned his shotgun on himself. Four recovering alcoholics. Marriage breakups. Children dead or disabled. Several in the news, accused of undue force, behavior not in the line .... One believed kinky.

All I've had is a worse month than usual. And not much worse, at that.

We're outside and skidding down the steep trail -- with two minutes to reach the road without punishment -- when I glance up through the birch trees.

"C'mon, move it!" someone hollers.

Hands push from behind and I'm falling, somersaulting down a bank beside the trail. My shoulder crashes into a birch stump, my knee comets onto a rock.

I roll onto my back, pain rushing through my body.

Shattered by dark branches, it looks down, a fractured smile. To think people are walking around up there right now.

I'm not really interested in that. I'm thinking about the person that carried me through in Rev. Meegan's stuffy living room:

Valerie Landor.

Katie and I were cruising '9th Street, checking the shadows. Show us cops a typical street scene and our eyes go to places yours ignore: doorways, discarded two-by-fours, idling cars, bulges at the waist. Dr. Bindek has proof if you don't believe: a study of eye patterns, before recruit training and after. We're creatures of the job. With Katie at the wheel, I studied locks, windows and rooftops. I stared between buildings, behind parked cars. If not for the job, I would have ignored not only these details but everything else about this strip. I saw the usual spare buildings side by side like shoe boxes in an unfinished cellar: musty firms with letraset signs announcing typewriters and business stamps; dusty stores with 50s window displays resembling old clothes in a basement closet. Anyone out at this hour would have felt their heart skip as the store fronts gave suddenly way to empty lots, ideal haunts for assaulters. But no one was out that we could see. We crawled through the intersection at 106th Avenue and dipped down toward the dark mouth of the Rat Hole.

Paris has the Eiffel Tower, Edmonton the Rat Hole. Embracing the grubby northside mood of '9th Street, this 300 foot tunnel beneath now abandoned railway tracks is narrow, hazardous and almost as ugly outside as in. If you speak with an Edmontonian who was actually born in the city, he or she will tell you the Rat Hole has always gone by that name. The reason, when you visit this well-kept secret, is obvious.

Honking furiously while speeding through the Rat Hole separates the real Edmontonian from the phony. Others may be walking underground at the time. That only adds to the amusement. One night I was walking through this dingy aqueduct, stooping slightly to avoid its dirty arching walls and trying not to breathe its gas fumes, when a pickup zoomed past. The passenger gave a sudden whoop. I jumped back, soiling my jacket on the cement; the elderly man in front of me also started. I pictured him clutching his chest. I saw myself adminstering CPR, my foot knocking against a hubcap, a metallic cry ringing through the tunnel. The Rat Hole is year-round Halloween and April Fools rolled into one.

Katie and I were halfway through that night when our right front tire blew with the sound of a shotgun in an echo chamber.

The springs of Buddy's cot chirp along with the frogs and crickets as he bends to lace his shoes for another trek to town. He's already been warned about coming back plastered. In addition, Mr. Firth suspects he's the brains behind a poker ring in the counsellor's cabin as well as the mysterious bookie known to be taking bets on NFL games. I heard Mr. Firth mutter that you can always count on a cop's son to be an ass-kiss or an asshole.

Let him be fired, I pray.

Perhaps since he's my older brother, Buddy feels he must be extra mean to me in his role as tent counsellor.

"Simon," he shouts, "why aren't you in your sleeping bag?"

I'm daubing at the red circle on my knee. It looks like a Hollywood bullet hole, and now that the pain has dulled to a persistent throb, I find it fascinating.

I find a bandage in my trunk, cover the knee, and slide into my bag. Tomorrow morning Mr. Firth is coming by to personally make sure I take a long dip before breakfast. Mr. Firth found me limping down the trail long after the others had disappeared, and long after our two minutes were up. I told him I'd slipped. He knew I was lying and said it would be dips for three mornings. The forecast calls for rain tomorrow. The only thing that will save me is lightning.

Katie and I reported to our next call smudged from the walls of the Rat Hole. The victim's mother met us at the door. He was a loner, social assistance, lived downstairs from her. Under psychiatric observation. Neighbors said he used to wander the streets, aimless, muttering at times, disjointed words: *no eggs, no eggs.* He used to sit in the park watching children on the carousel. Parents uneasy, decided in time he was harmless. He dabbled in photography, even had a makeshift dark room in one corner of his flat. The mother said he never did understand which chemicals to use when. "The only thing he really developed was his beard," she said.

Buddy waits till all five of us are stretched out for sleep, then fades into the night with the next-tent counsellor.

"I'm thinking of space science, myself," his lingering voice proclaims; he's already mastered the gruff, gravelly tones of a bar hound. "What a future!"

"Sure," says the other counsellor, "that is, if you don't end up back in the joint."

A breeze snuggles in under the rolled walls of our tent. No need to hook up mosquito netting. The last light has nearly faded as I pull the sleeping bag to my ears and stare through the guy posts and tent ropes over the A-shaped roofs of nearby tents at the black-scored sky.

It could be worse here at camp. The kids torment me because I'm a klutz at sports, but mainly because my dad's a lot less important than theirs. Back in Montreal, at West-End High, the kids torment me because my dad is a lot more important than theirs. This got worse two years ago when Dad was promoted to Chief Constable of the Westmount Constabulary and showed up in the news a lot. He's from a small-town family and really wants to be a big shot. Sending your kid to Camp Napawingue is one way, like driving a Lincoln, to let them know you count. But even the Chief Constable of Westmount can't earn enough to actually live in Westmount, so we're stuck in NDG, a rambling patch of west end ranging from subsidized housing to stone-walled mansions. Our own brick home on Harvard Avenue is nice enough, or was, before Dad started his frantic renovations.

I like to lie listening to the chorus of frogs and crickets. A moon sliver still hangs between dark lines of cloud as the first raindrops plunk against the canvas fly overhead. Occasionally a raindrop blows in on the wind and touches cold against my nose or cheek.

Imagine being up there tonight, walking on the moon. One solitary being of billions spilling down over the ages is first to step on the moon. It's that way with everything. Last night as the rain pattered overhead on canvas and the birch limbs swayed white in the darkness, I dreamt I was a tadpole. Pressed from every side, barely able to breathe in the crush of other tadpoles, struggling up a dark tunnel. Something glowing white in the distance, and all of us struggling madly to get there first. I couldn't decide what the white target was till I awakened to a blast of rain in my face.

I know it wasn't Katie who sicked the Chaplain on me. It was Delbert Brimmins, head of the computer room. A civilian given to deep brooding silences, sudden hostile stares -- was he too good for us or just scared? I suppose I should sympathize. For some reason, he found me easier to take than some. A few days after cutting the failed photographer down from the tree, I was finishing lunch in the cafeteria when Delbert sat across from me.

His glasses threw back green leaves of the surrounding atrium, and the black cover of a book. Delbert liked taking books from the police library upstairs; armed with a book, he became talkative -- if, that is, someone was in the cafeteria. Katie always told me not to be such a willing ear. "It just encourages him," she said.

It didn't take long, lying there, thinking, to know what it was all about. I had Rev. Meegan's sex education class behind me. He explained that the word is "penis," not "peanuts" like Larry Link thought. He announced that we could "hold our heads higher" if we didn't play with ourselves. Rev. Meegan's childish drawing of a sperm on the blackboard made me realize how much sperm resemble tadpoles.

Delbert shifted his book a few times, as if trying to match it with a pattern on the arborite. His mouth pursed as he searched for the correct fit. Then he gave a little tisk. With reedy voice, he resembled a church minister. If only I don't have to hear that voice, I thought. Just then, he began. He said the book dealt with suicide.

"It shows quite convincingly that people who kill themselves are cowards."

Delbert pushed his glasses up his nose and found the passage he wished to quote. I stood up.

"You're an asshole," I said.

One evening I'm slouched in the old armchair in my basement suite, a film book shut on my lap. It's midweek, not much happening at the nightclub where I work part-time; not much happening with me. I'm thinking about going to Dad's place to watch a movie. He called yesterday to say he and Sophie were taking a two-week trip to the States. I could use the TV, but no parties. Who would I ask to a party? Parents live in such delusion. Before hanging up, he said, "By the way, happy birthday. It is tomorrow, isn't it? I'm leaving a cheque in the vestibule drawer." I should go get it, maybe have dinner some place nice.

But I don't have the strength. The old place draws and repels. Too much there of my mom.

The phone rings.

"I have to drive," says Valerie. "Ready?"

I watch out the bedroom window, past red and yellow blossoms poking up from the rumpled earth. Black soil. Peering through this slot of earth and sky, I'm a frogman, surfacing: vision half above, half below, watermark slipsliding across my facemask.

The footsteps of my landlord with the prison camp tattoos creak across the ceiling. He dropped in my first day here to forbid nails in plaster. This is a quiet neighborhood, he said. Yes, Montreal West is a quiet neighborhood.

I can see the Greek lady who lives in the basement apartment with a side entrance adjacent to mine. She's watering her sunflower in its garden of cement, wearing black shades. She always wears black shades, to hide her frequent shiners. She insisted on coming in once, for tea or something, but was soon asking to comb my hair. She said her boyfriend beat her and she didn't know what to do. She wants to go back to Greece, but hasn't enough money.

The Camaro pulls up, top down. Valerie in sunglasses could be someone else. I go outside, trying not to rush.

A full white moon angles down like a geometry problem in the lingering blue sky.

"Where to?" says Valerie.

We're on the highway, hair flouncing in wind. Soon it's distant lights of Dorval Airport: ghostly warnings to dark shapes falling from the sky. Valerie follows the turnoff; weaves and winds to the meter parking. We go inside the terminus.

Not much happening here. Slow as the nightclub. We ride the escalator, buy two coffees in Styrofoam cups, sit at a small square table looking out on the mezzanine. Strangers pass, clipping inside themselves, wrapped up like the baggage they whip along as though saving it from thieves.

We leave our cups one inside the other and drift to the lounge seats looking out over the runway. We sit side by side and watch the planes taking off. Valerie speaks as if in her sleep:

"I'm that one ... going, going...."

She leans against my shoulder, stretches out on the bench, and puts her head in my lap. But nothing is touching now.

Police Departments are big on symbolism. The door to the Chaplain's office is always open, unless he's in session. You can help yourself to one of the mints in his dish, and never be considered stealing.

"Help yourself to a mint," the Chaplain said. I hate mints, but I took one not to seem rude. The door was closed now. Still, the lush smell of nearby plants filled the air. New headquarters won an architectural award, largely for the new age design of central atrium with terraced seating, surrounding balconies and running track. How progressive, they said, for a police building. Journalists raved. Poor stressed-out cops sit among plants, next best thing to the Muttart Conservatory, everything but a Japanese fountain. Of course, the space gained by the atrium was lost to the offices -- cubbyholes and broom closets. But the papers didn't go that far. And even if the Operations Manual didn't warn us not to speak to the media, we never bitch in public. Instead, we bitch to each other. With sneers for the atrium and running track, we keyed on the long narrow corridors, brown mortar walls extruding, rough jagged slabs like quartz.

The cabs dip by, blurs of checkered yellow. More cabs along this strip of upper west Broadway, than you'll see in all of Montreal. It's after eight, stores zippered shut behind metal sheets, bars. Sign outside the West End says a jazz trio. I'm buzzed and hammered. Again.

Inside, away from the lights of Broadway, I nearly stumble into the bar, blunder my way to the next room, take a wall table half-way to the stage.

It's Sunday. Loony toons. Local buskers cribbing their 15 minutes of fame. Right now it's the young guy who works the corner at 113th, beside the single room occupancy where I live. Pale and pasty, with voice to match, he limps about on a cane. He reminds me of an early CP case, but maybe he's had polio or something. I only stop to hear him when there's a crowd in front. His hands, his face, his tongue always on the edge of chaos.

He's strumming away under a blue spot, spittle everywhere, like gnats in moonlight, looking through the smoke so much like a real folkie. Usuallly he sings his own stuff. Right now, it's Bob Dylan.

Man has invented his doom
First step was touching the moon ...

I order the Scotch and lapse into slumber, head against the wall. When my eyes open, techies are up there priming for the main act, the jazz trio. A Keith Jarret solo flutters from from the PA, settles on the tables and the slowly circling surface of my Scotch like dust. I suddenly remember I burnt a hole the size of a nickle in my beard sucking that last joint. I'm looking into the pasty face of the folk singer.

"How'd it sound?" he says.

I tell him I was asleep. My voice croaks. I gulp a mouthful of Scotch.

"That's why I asked," he says.

Feeling too sick to move, I decide to tell him I'm expecting someone. With overt coversion, he eyes a table of old guys, black men, work boots.

"That one?"

He nods toward a thin man, speckled gray Afro.

"He's the best communicator in here, along with you."

I finish my Scotch and gesture for another as he explains that every song he sang was a request -- either by Afro man or me ... the fucked-up Canadian.

"How'd you know my nationality?"

"Burn holes in your beard. Two doubles in ten minutes."

He smiles.

"Greetings," he said as I stepped through the doorway. Before getting the call, Chaplain Grink used to manage a men's clothing store. The cynics among us believe he saw where the economy was headed and jumped into something more secure. But, along with multi-cultural training, the new Chief takes his Chaplain seriously. "Chaplain" is boldly printed on the latest org chart, right beside the row of Deputy Chiefs. In one of the muster rooms, someone has amended the org chart by drawing a line in felt pen from the Chaplain's box straight up the wall to the ceiling, where a crack has already started in the meager plaster. It's hard not to like Chaplain Grink. He reminds me of Doc on Gunsmoke.

"My friends don't dig me sitting with white types," the old man says. He's introduced himself as Jones Overcross. He takes out a felt tip and puts black lines on a napkin.

"That's how I sign," he tells me. An unkempt army jacket hangs from his shoulders, a hole in the left arm.

What about you?" he says.

I tell him I'm studying film at City College. Graduate work. The campus is in Harlem. Not all that far from where we're sitting right now. I wandered there lost one evening. I say I want to be a filmmaker.

"Want to be," he chides. "You is or you ain't."

The folkie laughs.

Condensation from the beer pitcher bleeds into the napkin; the black lines melt into into each other.

"That's a question," says Jones, with a nod to his blurring signature: "Is man in the universe. Is the universe in man."

"I'm so glad you decided to stop in," the Chaplain said.

We both knew I was *told* to stop in by my patrol sergeant, who made the suggestion as if saying to get my wisdom teeth out. He even gave me an exact appointment. Those who see the Chaplain become scuttlebutt of the department. You feel the people behind you in cafeteria line-up trembling with excitement; their eyes dart away when you turn to them. They're watching a soap opera climax in their soup bowls. I never take soup in the cafeteria; it's insipid, like most of the food.

I told the Chaplain that stopping in was no problem, but I did have things to do.

"Of course, of course," he said. "It's such a ... stressful job."

The Chaplain wasn't much on philosophy; not even theology. He wanted to know if anyone I worked with was a "problem". I said my squad and sergeant were fine. What about my partner, he wondered. He really wanted to know if Katie and I were getting it off. We weren't, but it was none of his business. I told him how much I liked working with Katie -- her humor, good sense, wide-ranging interests. I didn't tell him the thing I most like about Katie is that she and I are burning out at the same rate, even if she's been around a little longer, fourteen years, to my twelve.

Katie was the first woman constable assigned the same duties as the men. She fought the early wars, worried about proving herself in every new assignment, dreaded her stints in Education Unit, Victim Assistance, and Community Services as female ghettos for one. With Training Unit, she stared down each new recruit class; just as she felt the need to stare down each new partner. After two weeks of proving herself to me, she realized she was wasting her time, but for a different reason: I wasn't judging; in fact, I didn't care.

The folkie offers a clammy hand and a name: Findlay Bird. Finny. He's from nowhere, eats little, and writes stories. The first story in his present collection tells how a small band of New Yorkers discover that eating raw cockroaches protects them against a coming plague.

"Unlike the Middle Ages," says Finny. "They all died of scurvy. Wouldn't eat vegetables."

Chaplain Grink nodded mechanically. He didn't believe a word I said. "Perhaps the wife is a little jealous?" Jenny jealous? Yes, Jenny was jealous of Katie. Just as she was jealous of my reading alone in the upstairs office, of my solitary walks by the river.... Jealous of family, old loves, except Valerie, perhaps, because of Mediama ... But this was none of the Chaplain's business, either. Aware that further questions would simply add to empty answers, the Chaplain suggested I register in the upcoming stress management class.

"Everyone takes it sooner or later," he chirped. Then he reached for a mint.

Finny's got another one. A boy sets out to find who first wore the baseball cap backwards.

"Baseball cap backwards ... yarmulke."

Sunset laps orange and red on the water of Senior Bay. Senior Bay, otherwise known as the Swamp. In senior camp, we're considered old enough to sleep three-a-tent, with no counsellors, and we have our own beaten-up canoes beached in the swamp. No need to sign out with an officer before taking a paddle through the bullrushes. No one much favors the Swamp.

I'm well past the bullrushes now, simply coasting, paddle across gunwales. Water drips from the blade, disappears silk-like into its own reflection.

Shoreline spreads around me. Sunset shines from the sloped roof of the organ shed away in its grove of balsams rising from the lilly pads. It looks from my perspective as though a broad staircase climbs the hillside behind the balsams. White birches wave on either side of the staircase, which is really a series of railway ties set in the earth as seating for outdoor Chapel. Every Sunday morning, Rev. Meegan unlocks the shed padlock, and Mr. Merrit plays "Pomp and Circumstance" on the organ as Protestant, Jewish and Other boys file beneath swaying cedar and balsam boughs to preferred railway ties, younger ones scampering on high for glimpses of white sails on the horizon.

No motorboats allowed on Lake Napawingue. The Catholic boys, unfortunates, have to go into Napawingue Village to mass.

Even as a cynical senior camper, weary of council ring and the other phoniness of camp ritual, I still look forward to outdoor chapel.

I dip the paddle, a few strokes just to keep momentum across the still surface. I stare at sunset on the organ shed under the balsams.

I met Valerie in English class. The teacher put us together at the front, supposedly to discuss advanced literature. We played x's and o's, and she amazed me with her perfect imitation of the teacher's accent. "She's Glasgow," said Valerie.

Valerie wore leather coats, classy skirts and shoes that broke regulations. The teachers never seemed to notice. She'd transferred here, to lowly West-End High, from a posh girls' school in Westmount. That wonderland again. My Dad's benefactor. Highest income per capita in Canada.

Of literature I recall us saying little. Years later I remember the story she wrote about her dog Portage buried in the backyard. And her reaction when the teacher read a poem by Pablo Neruda:

> *If you, beloved, have died*
> *The leaves will fall from the trees*
> *And settle on my breast*
> *The rain shall fall from my soul ...*

Valerie rolled her eyes. "Such bullshit," she said.

Finny's got another one. About a guy who answers a personal ad in the *Village Voice*. The ad says: "Looking to swap. Clothes, job, relations, friends, possessions, past, present, future -- you become me, I become you."

Finny and Jones talk art. Jones says New York sucks for living space, but it's Mecca for the creative soul. They both agree on a current hot spot: Caine Gallery, on Madison. Finny pulls out a coffee-stained sheet smeared with pencil. It's a sketch of a painting he saw there he says. He's writing a song about it. I wave for another Scotch.

Dr. Bindek can tell your stress level simply by the pallor of your fingertips. Nails white, danger nigh. Jeffries to my right looks at his fingertips. He tousles his thick black beard with the other hand. The Department authorized beards over five years ago, but I never bothered re-growing mine. That was one life; this is quite another.

"What color is boredom," Jeffries whispers to me, just loud enough to throw the doctor off his delivery.

"That's not boredom," I say, looking at his fingertips, "that's arrested development."

"Perhaps we need a smoke break, some of us?" says Dr. Bindek.

I look at *my* fingers spread on the desktop. The old scar runs beneath the left-hand knuckles, crisscrossed with a recent cut from a mêlée at a west-end bar. It looks as if the scar has started to bleed. What is that word for spontaneous bleeding?

Tina Crowe sits one step above Lucy and writes. Lucy sits one step below Tina tinkling her chain as she gazes down at the lobby floor. Tina has swept both marble stairs, rippled with use, of cockroaches. Lucy has her eye on the number-nine-shoe-size cockroach lying on its back, legs waving in the air like leaves of grass.

Tina's writing about last night's incident. She tucks her page into a plastic sleeve in her scrapbook, and turns the page. Her Doomsday Book, Mr. Kay calls it.

The incident was in the project next door, young woman throat slashed, but the suspect is from our building, so the episode counts. Cops got him early this morning in the South Bronx, Fort Apache. Occupation: drug dealer on the upper west side. Kept a tidy room on the ninth floor with posters of Malcolm X, Muhammed Ali and Geronimo. Also Stevie Wonder. Tina finds that interesting. She loves Stevie Wonder. A modern Scott Joplin. Tina plays half of "The Entertainer" and the first 15 bars of "Maple Leaf Rag" every evening on her piano, lugged up seven flights of stairs seven years ago still with the dust of her mother's New Hampshire parlor on the walnut keyboard cover.

Tina records every murder, suicide, rape, crippling injury, berserk outburst, and theft over $500 or similar statutory offense, committed either in the building or by a current occupant. Newspaper photos and TV and radio news transcripts, painstakingly copied from cassette recordings, appear with each entry. Tina likes statistics. A back page lists all incidents in order of frequency. Suicide tops.

Tina Crowe lives on the seventh floor, beside Mediama, in one of the rare suites containing a private toilet. Posters of David Cassidy , the Carpenters and Donny Osmond adorn her walls. Tina especially loves Donny Osmond. She's already been to two of his concerts. Relevant news clippings are stored alongside the concert programs in her china cupboard behind the blue pewter heirloom vase .

Today she wears a black Donny Osmond T-shirt from the second concert. Her sunken cheeks are white with 50s face powder; her lips black-red, like the mouth of a child's drawing.

Having written everything about the murder last night, Tina opens another tenant file. Everyone who lasts one year in the building has a file opened, to save our Doomsday keeper time when something happens to him or her. All in alphabetical order. She prints name, age if known, occupation if known, annual income, if known, favourite colour, if known, parents' first names, if known, favourite restaurant, if known, and favourite kind of pet. She always finds out about the pet. Twenty some names are already part of Tina's tenancy file, including the rent collector Mr. Kay, who really doesn't live here, but seems to, for all the time he spends in the manager's office smoking cigars and drinking vodka. There's Mrs. Zirra, with the prison camp tattoos, who speaks fourteen languages and used to work in the UN library. Her current occupation is standing in the doorway with her wallet and various dishes tied to her head, screaming STOP VIOLENCE. There's a student from Bangladesh who sits and stares from the lobby bench. There's Mediama, born somewhere in Peru, to an ad copy father from Madison Avenue, who tells fortunes for clients as far away as Hollywood. With this job, Mediama has the only private telephone in the building. There's Joseph the Eritrean gypsy cab driver saving money to go home and fight the revolution. There's Jones Overcross, artist, occupation drinking at the West End. There's Woody Cage, old janitor from South Carolina who mops the blood each time someone jumps. There's the Nigerian, occupation unknown, maybe some sort of mature student. Big and sullen. There's Finny Bird, troubadour. Tina has a crush on Finny Bird, his guitar's so pretty, except his hair is too long and tangly. If only he could sing some Donny Osmond.

Today Tina enters the Canadian. Simon Brainwaite. Occupation: alcoholic drug user. Favourite pet: cockroach.

Valerie never mentioned *her* father, but I saw them together one time. I was with Buddy in a jazz club in Old Montreal -- the one where I bussed table and washed dishes nine years later. The waiter glanced at my baby-smooth face and snorted. If not for Buddy, he would have kicked me out. But he never questioned Valerie's age when she came in. I recognized her from behind; not simply the suede jacket and sunglasses perched on her head -- I knew her precise height, shape, shade, relation and texture.

A boy around my age was with them, a brother judging from her indifference. The man stroked the fur collar of his coat and gave their order. He had black eyes and a black mustache. He looked around like my Algebra teacher figuring a problem. Or my dad facing the journalists. The man lit a cigarillo and held it daintily. The pungent odor reminded me of one time when I visited a Catholic church with Tommy Chipps and he farted. Valerie's father reached across, laid his hand on hers. Her fingers curled under like a turtle disappearing into its shell. Smoke veiled the man's creased brown face.

When my friend went to the can, I bribed the waiter for information about the customer with the fur collar. He said, "Court of Queen's Bench."

That prompted a foray in the library. I found newspaper stories about Judge Mason Landor. The stories called him a "hard liner," a "hawk" in the war on crime. He dealt the toughest sentences, he cut the loopholes for parole.

All that year Valerie stayed crazy in love with Kyle Odigg. Captain of the football team, six TD passes in just three games. Slouched back against his locker, he'd smirk and curl a come hither finger. I couldn't imagine anyone reeling Valerie Landor in that way. But it worked Even with the whole school watching, she'd give him that satisfaction.

There's a circle of people on the sidewalk watching The bus waits two houses before the old oak tree. Fat man who owns the old oak tree stares out in his undershirt. I'm not scared, for once, not of him. The Bruneau twins in their navy blue school tunics pass his lawn and he never even yells to keep off his grass. The twins come slow like someone's pushing from behind. Their faces look white and their eyes turn dark like when you drip black paint into blue. They stop and stare at the big front tire of the bus. They point and they whisper.

The buses go past our house every day from Sherbrooke Street to Nôtre Dame de Grâce. I like to stand behind buses in winter. The big pipe, level with my chin, sends out hot bus breath. Mom says not to get too close. But the buses on our street never stop. Just this bus. It stopped messy. Its big front tire touches the sidewalk, but its big back tire sticks way out into the road. The door is open, and all the seats are empty. Anyone could go in and take the roll of tickets. A man in a helmet leans back to throw a football on the back of the bus. He's going to throw a long bomb, a touchdown, right over the people at the corner.

A bundle lies in the curb. A rough gray blanket with red stripes along the edges lies over the bundle. The red ribbons running out from under the blanket reach inside me. I can taste them. They taste stronger than peppermint, which I hate, and sweeter than chocolate, which I love. I feel afraid and ashamed, because the grownups will say I spilled something. They don't look at me, though. They look with eyes like the Meegan's boxer dog when the Meegans leave him on a chain and drive away. Boxer-eye grownups keep staring at the shape under the blanket. Once Brenda Meegan let me play in her room and her cat crawled under the bedspread. She said he was "burrowing." The lump under this blanket is burrowing, but the grownups can't see it move. Their eyes hold still.

That evening, Mrs. Meegan sits on her porch and shakes her head slowly side by side, and Mrs. Singer on her porch, beside ours, does the same. Mrs. Singer and Mrs. Meegan never see each other even though their porches are separated only by a narrow driveway; but this evening one says words and the other says words back. She was so young, they say, she was so smart and so happy. She had a life ahead, they say.

Mom, Dad and Judith are what Buddy calls solemn all evening, too. "She had a life ahead of her," says Dad. "Her mother wanted her to be a doctor," says Mom. Mom is crying. They mean for me to feel sorry.

Next day Miss Secord puts pictures on the blackboard with scotch tape and asks us which one we like best. She tells us to color our own picture. I want to colour red ribbons on black tar. Four-years-old red. I'm already six-and-a-half. I remember every turn in the pattern. I like this picture most. I'm bad, because I can't feel sorry.

Next year was all Kyle and Valerie again. Still, I got the sense she wasn't like other girls. No matter how hooked on Kyle, some part of her remained free. When spring rolled in, I thought for once in my life I could show some guts. I called up the Landors to ask Valerie to the grad dance. But Valerie wasn't in. At least, I guess not. It was four or five on a weekday afternoon, and I got her mother. I had trouble speaking above my pounding heart. It was a moment before I realized her voice was thick, slurred and angry. When she heard me say "Valerie" she got angrier still. I can't recall which of us hung up first, but I never called back. And when I saw Valerie next day in school, my courage fled. Or common sense returned.

The morning after the grad -- at which Valerie and Kyle merely showed their faces -- the paper ran another story on Judge Landor. There was a photograph: Judge Landor in his study, pen raised, 303 on the wall behind. A photograph on his desk showed four justices sharing the hunt, arm in arm, gloating over the body of a doe. Judge Landor held the 303. The story said he considered that gun his "treasured possession."

Beside me, Kevin Patch smiles at a joke from Dr. Bindek. Kevin has a teddy-bear shape. His appearance and former high spirits used to remind me of Robin Williams. Now Kevin has 551 stitches across various parts of his chest, stomach, back, arms and legs. He reported to a domestic, alone, no Katie for backup, and faced a man with a blade. Kevin pulled his revolver, pointed, but the man wouldn't stop. "One of those death-wish wackos," said our sergeant. "He *wanted* you to waste him. " Kevin is the sort who looks down when walking so he won't step on ants. He wouldn't pull the trigger. Blow after blow he kept hoping the attacker would stop. Kevin taught us CPR and first aid. He saved his own life by whispering instructions to the people who found him. Where to press, where to tie towels. We shy away in the change room now when Kevin undresses. Something about those zippers unnerves us. We don't know how to say what we feel. And the high spirits have died. In their stead, a dark, brooding silence. Not because of the cuts; because, finally, he pulled the trigger.

Five years since high school graduation, I guess it's made a difference. I'm bigger, bearded. I've got a degree in filmmaking from Simon Fraser University. It impresses the old crowd at the Alsatian Tavern back in Montreal, though I'll never shoot ten frames of consequence.

I find that basement apartment in Montreal West, beside the Greek lady and her sunflower. I'm waiting part-time at the nightclub where I saw Valerie and the judge. This makes me cool. After the chairs go up, I find left-over crumbs of hashish in the musicians' dressing room, smoke up for the 2:00 a.m. bus ride home; I look out the window, dreaming of great films with large red lettering: directed by Simon Brainwaite. My landlord with the prison camp tattoos drops in to inspect for nails. No one else calls. No one writes. I imagine some exciting letter turning up. Some old lover from the coast begging me to return. The days pass. Autumn to winter. Winter to spring. I shoot nothing, not even a photograph.

Phone rings. Voice from the past.

Twelve minutes later I'm serving tea and crackers to Valerie Landor. Turns out she lives up the street. Someone from the Alsatian told John Donnelly I was back in town, and John's going steady with Valerie's best friend, Donna.

Valerie inside my apartment feels wrong. Landlord and wife have made everything so fussy and prim. At least her first impression was the glassed-in porch gracing my private entrance. The Greek woman gets only a Rusco screen door, aluminum glare in a slab of cement.

We're sitting at a table crammed at the end of the corridor, so-called kitchen, bare soles on humid linoleum, belittled by white walls, cabinets, cupboards, drawers. Across from us the bedroom: wood floor almost country, white walls less oppressive. There's the frogman's slot of earth and sky, red and yellow blossoms waving with a breeze that stirs the air inside. It would be so much better in there -- but I can't suggest a bedroom. I noticed the bed looking out, suggestive, so I closed the door.

Still, things could be worse. My portfolio of stills from Simon Fraser impresses Valerie. She flips through, nodding. She's taking fine art at Sir George Williams, her third year.

I ask to see her work.

"Some time," she says.

We go out together. We order wine and burgers at a joint along Saint Catherine Street near McGill. Before her phone call, I'd heard some talk in the Alsation. Something about how Valerie Landor nearly died.

Dr. Bindek tells another story. One day in 1975, when Bindek was just starting up practice, a colleague went out of town, leaving her patients his name should any of them need emergency counselling. Soon after, one of the patients phoned, desperate to talk. Bindek met with her at the clinic. Turned out she was going through severe symptoms of grief for the death of her sister. Dr. Bindek offered the usual wisdom, and felt he'd handled another routine case well. But as the woman was leaving the office, something occurred to him, a question too obvious to have remembered. "*When* did your sister die?" asked the doctor. "May 13, 1952," said the woman.

I wonder if *almost dying* is like an antibiotic: injection with some of the disease to drive off the whole. Someone said it was TB. These days? They put Valerie in hospital, quarantine, someone said.

"I heard you were sick," I hint to Valerie over a second glass of wine. "You never came," she accuses. What sudden magic, I wonder, that after not seeing each other for five years, not so much as a letter, I was to know her whereabouts; to know the game of best friends had resumed. Valerie sulks; mind you, with shades of forgiveness.

We drive home in Valerie's Camaro convertible. A spring breeze whips against our faces. Bright colours, glass, brick, shop windows, streets loaded with people in high style. At the fork with Côte Saint Antoine, we leave the howl of Sherbrooke for the silence of Westmount. One of the stone mansions above houses Judge Landor. I wonder which, but I never ask Valerie about her father. She's made that clear. She's been living in her own plain apartment in Montreal West, on Hudson -- same street as me -- for three years.

Valerie stops outside my place. We kiss.

"I had a great time, " she says. Smiling.

This is unreality. I'm floating in one of those movies I'll never make. I become someone else. An imposter with the name Simon Brainwaite buys Valerie a rose. She stops in one evening for coffee and he gives it to her.

She smiles sadly.

Dr. Bindek says it's important to keep unnecessary stressors out of our lives. We get enough gore and grief in the line of duty. Nix the slasher flicks, and worse, those heavy dramas.

I put up my hand, tugging for the ceiling like a kid in grade five. One finger, number one, two fingers, number two.

"Yes?" says Dr. Bindek.

"Dr. Johnson says the blinding scene in *King Lear* is too terrible to witness."

"Ah -- a stress man?"

"Not exactly.

Dr. Bindek wants to know my point, in that case.

"Are you saying we shouldn't watch *Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth?*"

A few laughs. The doctor narrows his eyes.

"I mean, let's forget Beethoven, too. Those quartets, far too disturbing. From now on, I'm listening to heartbeats and wind chimes."

"Surf and bird calls," whispers Jeffries.

"Cool it you guys," shouts the pimply sergeant from Traffic Section. Traffic produces such assholes. I turn, back to the teacher for cover, and give the finger.

Others are calling my name, now -- acting like some big deal is going on.

"Go for a smoke, Brainwaite," pimples tells me.

I spin around again, tipping some books from Jeffries' desk. He shouldn't leave them so near the edge.

"I don't fucking smoke," I tell the sergeant under my breath.

When I turn back, Dr. Bindek is writing something in his notepad.

One evening we knock around together with John and Donna at the park, riding the carousel, that sort of thing. Now that I'm half going out with Valerie, I'm half friends with John Donnelly.

Big John we called him on the football team. Big John has a slow sideways manner of looking at you, melon head tilted. He used to carry the largest book bag in school, brimming with texts on history and politics. Big John was all-star tackle on the junior team that won City Championship with Kyle at quarterback. The following year, I made quarterback. Half the championship team was gone, graduated; we lost the semis. Big John and the others blamed me. Part of the reason, I guess, is that I didn't hang out with them.

One night, hot-rodding around west end, Big John and his buddies screeched up beside me. "Hey Brainwaite, have a beer." They didn't believe I drank, and wanted to mock me. Or maybe someone had filled an empty bottle with piss. So it feels odd hanging out with Big John. To sit with him at the Al drinking beer. After a recent jug, he told me he'd held a lot against me. Everyone had. They all thought I was stuck up, because my father was police chief. They hated how Paul Curtis, our football coach, favored me. They smelled the rat. Big John said he felt bad because it wasn't fair. He said I had talent, and maybe I could be good for Valerie. He said she and Kyle Odigg had a "stormy" relationship. "Always fighting," Big John said. "Kicks, bites, bruises." John said Valerie went into the dumps when Kyle dropped her to marry someone else and went off to be a pilot.

John seems to really care about Valerie. I wonder why she's so down on him. Valerie has said she can't stand John. Can't trust him. She's scared what will happen if Donna marries John Donnelly.

Classroom shudders and heaves. Dr. Bindek's voice dies in a drilling sound like machine gun fire, with the odd land mine thrown in. You never know when they're going to resume work on the foundation. The building has pretty well been falling down around us. So far, the cost of repairing major flooding into cells has been $4 million. "Let 'em drown," say the old cynics. "Let's all drown."

As we straggle out of the classroom it comes to me, that word I was trying to remember: stigmata.

Now Donna's calling us over to the swings. I head for them, feet slipping back in sand. When I look around, John and Valerie are walking toward the street, toward her Camaro convertible. Hand in hand. "Come on," he calls. "Let's go back to the house."

Donna's parents have one of those big sprawly houses with covered porches everywhere outside, and kids' clothes and shoes everywhere inside. It seems half the neighborhood is in her rec room. Laughing, dancing. Some girls try to involve me. I brush them off. I'm somewhere else. I'm building up inside. Counting down.

Valerie says she's going; I can catch a ride. She gets to the Camaro first and when I reach for the passenger's door she guns the car forward. She squeals to a stop, but when I catch up she guns forward again.

Harvard Avenue after dark is spookier than the Headless Horseman. I'm sure he's waiting at the top of the old oak tree. If I'm at Tommy Chipps' house, he has to walk me half-way home, to the old oak tree. And if he's at my house, I have to walk him. At the tree, we turn and run.

Harvard avenue has Cayenne, the Dutauds' big dog. He's nothing like Took. Took is the beautiful police dog Dad trained fifteen years ago. He lives with us now. He looks like Rin Tin Tin. Cayenne looks like Wily Coyote, but not funny. He comes all the way up to my shoulder. Cayenne hides in the shrubs and jumps out growling. Once he knocked me down and wouldn't let me up. Sometimes he bites the mailman, and the city makes the Dutauds put Cayenne on a chain. But old man Dutaud likes to see Cayenne jump out at people.

John and Donna watch from the front porch. Finally I'm into the Camaro.

Valerie looks blank. Silence. By the time we stop in front of my place, my anger's peaking. I rage about her holding hands with John when she's acting like she's going out with me. I jump out, slam the door.

Next day John calls. Says Valerie's had some rotten things happen. He mentions only one -- getting turned down by the Westmount Constabulary. "Passed all the tests," says John. "First in intelligence. Physical, no prob..... but half an inch short."

"My parents are in Ottawa," she says as the Camaro pulls away from the meter parking. "But I'd rather not use their house."

Dorval Airport already behind us. The highway flying fast in our eyes.

"My dad's out of town," I say, barely over the engine. "We can go there."

I'm thinking of mentioning that it's my birthday....

Dad's in his workshed out back, tinkering with one of his hobby planes, an Aero. He flies them by remote control in some field in Lachine. I never could work up any interest, especially in the war planes. But I make a great show of enthusiasm today. "You look like you need sleep," he says, ignoring my false attention. Sleep and more.

Dad disapproves of my long hair. Plus Mom's been dead seven years. Older brother Buddy's long gone, older sister Judith's finally moved out, Aunt Sophie, Mom's sister, takes up more of the house than ever. It's really not worth the hassle. But I came anyway. Even stopped for a haircut first.

I'm agonizing over how Valerie and I were this close before my tantrum. What better way to redeem myself?

Except it doesn't work out that way. Dad's never bent a rule in his life. He's not about to bend one now.

"The rules are made for a reason, son. What if she has to take on some big SOB?"

"Half an inch!" I cry. "That's going to make a difference?"

I rave about Valerie. I say she'll make the best cop Westmount ever saw. I tell him to never mind bending rules. Change the rules.

He says you have to draw the line somewhere.

"Stay for dinner," he says. "Sophie's fixing ham."

The smoke and liquor stench takes me back to something. Incense, anal exhaust. I can't quite recall. Mr. Kay's got me doubled -- six vodkas to three. I vow never to drink with Mr. Kay, but sometimes I forget after killing a jug in my own room upstairs. He's going on about goddam wars -- waving his cigar in three stump fingers courtesy of a Serb interrogator -- when he sees her.

In the early '60s, the city planted a maple sapling on every lawn. Every day I studied our tree, seeking signs of increase, dreading signs of decline. I worried our tree wouldn't keep up to the Singers' fatter, taller one next door. In nightly prayers, I called on God to remember our maple. Today it lifts green-budding limbs high above the roof. I think I gave up praying right around the time I realized that by cheering on our maple, I let the Singers' die.

She picks her way around pieces of broken glass. Into the lobby, into herself, mysterious stares at ceiling and walls from behind dark glasses. Too dark in here for the shades. Off they come. Into designer bag. I can smell the leather all the way from the manager's office, right through the vodka and cigar smoke.

Eyes moist, red, perhaps she's been drinking, crying, both ... Heading for the wide stairs. Tina and Lucy deserted for a walk, Tina with leash in one hand, Doomsday Book in the other.

"Vhat you vant!" yells Mr. Kay.

Mr. Kay drops his glass and lurches from his manager's chair out onto the worn-down marble floor.

"In this residence, you report."

"I'm looking, just looking."

"Looking. Looking tail, looking crack, looking ripoff. Everyvone looking, ya."

"I used to live here."

Mr. Kay leans back, as though to focus, studies her fingers.

"Go upstairs vearing that jewel. Go. You'll never come down."

So I escort her, floor by floor. She stares at the cockroaches upside down like turtles, dust balls jammed along separating baseboards, dead rat carpets, glimpses into single rooms crammed with children, communal bathrooms, the tattered curtains hanging like remnants after a war. A man screams at us because someone has once again mistaken the sink for the toilet.

Distant roar of airplanes rings in my ears; we pull up out front of the old house in NDG. Valerie and I walk together toward the drive between our house and the Bruneaus'. It never occurs we should stow the Camaro in the garage. I forget we exist to be watched, judged, and misunderstood.

If only Valerie could see the outside the way it's supposed to be. I could kill Dad for his tasteless renovations. Gone is the upstairs verandah, the stained glass door looking out from my bedroom. Just because the door cast a hooded figure on my wall, which sometimes entered my dreams, they thought I would be pleased with the new clear glass window. That was eight years ago, I wanted to say. I was four years old. But what use trying to tell them anything.

We pass the flat green lawn, a perfect patch tended by Italian gardeners, like a golf green. The lawn used to be hilly, unpredictable, a perfect place to build forts and hide out. It fit in with the old wood porch, comfortable as an overstuffed chair. Now there's a cement porch, with curlicue cement stairs; they remind me of a dentist's office building.

Our footsteps fall silently on black tar. In the old days, we would have crunched along to the sound of gravel, and smelt the earth. Before Dad paved the whole driveway over. Vines grew up the walls, but these have been cut. Valerie's indifferent to these losses, I suppose. To ease the mounting tension, I tell Valerie a little about the Singers who live in the brick home attached to ours.

Like Marie Bruneau, Emma Singer and I were playmates -- right till the end of kindergarten, when she started at English Catholic elementary. In the way of little girls and boys, Emma was the authority. I remember her telling me three things: her father didn't believe in God, peeing with an open bathroom door was a sin, and Simon and Emma were going to get married. I don't bother telling Valerie about the third point. No doubt Emma Singer, engaged to an orthodontist, gives thanks that prophecy three was wrong.

It's dark now. Street light glows, reminder of those bleak airport warnings. We pass the mock hangar of Aeros, slip in by the back door. What's to drink?

We sit in the living room, in front of the fireplace whose chimney Dad never bothered unclogging, sipping gin.

We pass a mosque, sandals and runners piled half way up the yellowed wall outside. We pass the door of Tina Crowe, displaying Donny Osmond, and the door of Mediama, displaying the Zodiac illustrated with animals and mythic figures like drawings from a child's book.

She wants to look out a certain window, mine it so happens, so I take her there, end of a hall, top floor. She takes in the crooked orange-crate sized cooler, the grease-covered gas range, the black-coated mirror over the wash basin. She seems impervious to the empty wine jug, overflowing ashtray, scattered clothing and unmade bed. The film books serve as bedside tables.

Not much else here -- roach traps every three feet along the baseboards. I don't need curtains. My predecessor painted the glass snot green. I scraped the top half with a razor blade and left the bottom. I tug and the bottom pane rises with a gasp of falling paint. She stares across the hazy Hudson at smokestacks.

"My father practised here," she says. "He loved to look across the river. Haydn needed water, he always said. No one could interrupt while he was working, except Elsie, three times a day with snacks."

Her father owned the eleventh and twelth floors. The ninth belonged to another member of the group -- the New York String Quartet. Below them were doctors, lawyers, an architect.

She used to play with the other children in the lobby, all plush red carpets, polished marble and shining brass and crystal. The doorman gave each child a lifesaver every day, and let them touch his brass buttons. She thought he looked like one of the Palace Guard.

"Like Mr. Kay," I tell her. "He's got army experience, too."

Wood beam ceilings, bay windows, sliding wood and glass doors, even a wood-encased buzzer system for maids my mother never kept -- a once stately house, understated, English; failing, like a woman in middle-age despondency, to make the most of herself.

What a nice house, Valerie says. How long have I lived here? All my life, till seventeen. I was newborn when we arrived from Winnipeg, father rising from Deputy Chief. I remember my joy at the rolling lawn, the dusty drive, the wood porch. The more Dad changed things, the more Marie Bruneau would shake her head and sigh. We talk about the number of English selling, moving out to Toronto. My dad has already made enquiries elsewhere. Valerie says her father may move as well. She nods, admires the piano, legacy of my grandmother. I try not to hear the echo of Mom's footsteps on the stairs. Her voice calling, who is it dear, who have you brought to visit?

Valerie moves closer, puts down her gin, grows serious.

Pale moon waxes in the gathering dusk over the Capilano Freeway; the cars crawl northward like ants. One of the ants thinks about taking a walk that evening down by the river. Jenny won't care this time; she has her yoga class. I went with her, for a while. The instructor calls the body a stifled scream. Fears, sorrows, hurts packed away in corpuscles, sinews and marrow, childhood diaries stashed in the cobwebs. Yoga gets the energy flowing, says the teacher. Frozen memories melt like islands of ice. One by one, the icicles fall. Upside down, doubled in two, knees and arms wound together, the yogis wail, piercing shrieks of desolation. I cover my ears, but sound rips through my chest, bounces from walls and ceilings. To hear these women, small bodies howling fury, is like watching a Honda Civic tear past our souped-up Chevelle in a high-speed chase. I remember history class, reading about Caesar's army as they sailed toward Dover, glimpsed the Celtic warriors waving spears from the cliffs, heard the cries. "Ululation: howl, wail, cry of lamentation." The book said Caesar's men, hearing the women, were almost too terrified to continue. I stopped going to yoga with Jenny. My frozen wastes resisted warming; resisted inversions, bendings, counterbendings. The teacher's best efforts could not coax a dribble. Besides, I knew the women felt uneasy with a man present. Weren't those cries of lamentation, after all, the result of men?

Once after a movie together, I began to make a comment but before I said three words Valerie shouted, "Don't patronize me!" Now she demands an appropriate gown.

My old room beside the master bedroom, small and once comforting, aside from the hypnotizing hooded figure from the old stained-glass door, became Mom's when she was too ill to sleep with Dad. I picture the trashy magazines by the bedside, recall Dad once teasing that everything she read had footnotes. Furniture still arranged for her. Not there.

Nor the master room. Nor Judith's old room at the other end of the hall. Aunt Sophie uses that one now, scene of my old surreptitious explorations of feminine mysteries. What dark secrets under the very roof of the police chief.

I tell Valerie to go into the room at the top of the stairs. Buddy's old room, but neutralized since his departure. Mom turned it into a sort of guest room, suitable for either sex. I visit Sophie's room and return with one of her nightgowns. It doesn't seem quite timely to mention the family rumor that Sophie slept with Maurice Duplessis.

Pile-up ahead. Signal light flashes from the roadside as we merge into one lane and grind to a halt.. My hands rest on top of the wheel like someone else's. I seem to have lost feeling in fingers and feet. This has been happening often lately. Numbness creeping like an ice age from the nether regions. Return of my football aftermath? The line beneath my left-hand knuckles, ghostly white in the thickening dusk, could be a mark of ice. Remove everyone from the road and now is ideal to chop those fingers away. One evening on a canoe trip, gathering wood by the lakeshore, I came very close. I put my fingers on a log and raised the hatchet. Ax slipped, I could have said. But Jenny's fuss would have angered me. Perhaps if I'd been alone.

We lie in bed, lights off.

I'm still a tadpole in a crush of tadpoles fighting madly up the dark tunnel. There's a white glow through the window. Unreachable. The moon. I still don't believe it. I'm where I dreamed, dreamed against belief, and all I want is to be anywhere else. Not away from Valerie. Away from the darkness there....

Buddy recommended an older woman for lover number one. Carefree. That's who I found. Nova Scotia hell-raiser.

Perhaps I can lighten the mood. I'm reaching to play with Valerie's hair, she takes my hand, leads it to her mouth, and closes her teeth. With my other hand, I feel the trembling in her neck, the strain of exertion. Eyes adapting to the night, I study the black-blue line of her jugular. I lie motionless and silent as one night under the stars in LaVéréndryé Park, a bear shuffling from the forest to thrust her snout against my head.

I feel the bone beginning to give.

Someone honks. More and more impatience. The pent-up despair of a city disillusioned shows itself everywhere, especially to us cops. It's the people's fault for having such hopes in the first place. Ignoring the honks and curses, I sit back and look up at the moon. During my drop-out years in New York, I discovered the writings of Gurdjieff. He says we are sleep-walkers, robots responding not to choice but to habit. Habit and nothing more. And the purpose of life on planet earth? In the cosmic food chain, the soul of every unawakened human being nourishes the moon. A few fingers more or less make no difference. It's just a shadow thought in my head. That's where I'm bound, all of me, sooner or later; that's where we meet.

The lineup starts to crawl forward. I follow. If only I'd had the wits to publish my Camp Napawingue dream, I could have saved Gurdjieff with his sleek guru's pate and handlebar mustache a lifetime's work of study and publishing. My one page book of one sentence entitled *Lost Seed* : "Only one sperm gets the egg."

She teaches at a suburban day camp, so she's gone next morning after a quick cup of coffee. She waited in the living room, smoking, as I filled the percolator. My birthday check's in my back pocket. I found it this morning, in the vestibule drawer, with a note in Dad's block writing. *Happy Birthday*. After a management training course, Dad began printing everything in block letters. Clarity. A block letter note in his daytimer reminds him to ask his secretary every Tuesday morning how she enjoyed aerobics the night before.

Valerie skips down the front steps, ignorant of birthdays. So much for executive clarity. It's another bright morning, but the rays are still indirect. She wears the sunglasses on her head.

Not a car on the street. The buses no longer run on Harvard. They stopped that soon after the little girl was hit. "As if that could bring her back, Mrs. Meegan said, Mrs. Singer overhearing from her nearby front porch.

I watch as the Camaro growls and rolls into the avenue. She turns to wave. I wave back. All five fingers intact. Just a deep gash below two knuckles. Normally, she says, she would have bitten them off. Mr. James, straining past his belly for his paper on the front porch across the street, can't see this wound. He does see Valerie driving away. His jaw drops. He follows the Camaro with eyes of fire, as if we have been hurling cat turds against his window.

"Simon?" she calls from the laundry room downstairs. Now who else was she expecting? I tell myself to be understanding. Ten years ago, the tornado everyone said could never hit Edmonton, caught her alone in the condo. A nearby house was swept away. Three dead. For two weeks afterward, the streets were cordoned, patrolled by volunteers to limit the flow of sightseers from all across the city, the province, the continent, pouring in to gawk at what the papers called "the wreckage." She's been jumpy ever since. And there's at least one rapist working the neighborhood.

TV blares from the living room. Local newscasters going on about hard times for the City of Champs: a stagnant metropolis, failing growth, minus Wayne Gretzky, always just rabout to lose the NHL Oilers, the International Airport, snarled in dispute after dispute, falling further and further behind white collar Calgary. But then, the whole province, so recently a Mecca of economic opportunity, now languishes in debt. Every day, another bundle of lost jobs -- teachers, social workers, health care, bureaucrats, manufacturing. Like the country. Like the world. A system no one wants to admit will never work again, not that it ever worked in the first place.

Jenny appears from the basement stairs, tugging a plastic basket heaped with clothes. I watch the play of muscles in her arms, formed by the prairie farm. Even when we met in New York, there was no mistaking the bitter winds and sweeping sky in her face. Her hair is the longest I can remember: almost to the top of her ears. She was bald when we met, the monastic look favored by her leader in the Children of Light.

"Kiss," she smiles coming toward me. She leads my hand to her belly. Baby due in January. Her first. "In the nick of time," says her doctor. My first, too, I suppose. I take the basket to the couch, we begin folding. Gears, ball bearings, toggle switches... You'd think we were driven by the ticking of the clock over the fireplace, cold since the tornado dropped a wad of debris in the chimney.

She asks how the day went. She knows I have some sort of workshop all week.

"Pointy goatee, pointy short term memory," I say.

"You never make any sense," she says.

Harvard Avenue after dark has the big Lacasse boy. He follows me with one hand hidden behind his thigh. He pretends to be innocent as we shimmer through the shadows of the big oak tree. Then he can't hold back any more. He's beside me in three bounds, snorting back glee, crooked grin breaking his face into pieces. He glows, beef red. Under the white round street lamp, he lifts his hand, dangles it above my shoulder. The long sharp needle point of his dart comes down. It bites into my shoulder and the blood comes out, almost black in the shadows.

I'm running, tearing up Harvard Avenue. I'll never make my own house, never. I dash up the Bruneaus' stairs, pounding, pounding, too short to reach the doorbell, please be home, please be home, please...

Candlelight mutes the cockroaches scurrying across her bookcase past crucifix, incense bowl, necklace, tarot pack; mutes the bead curtains, the pots and pans over the stove, tiny by some standards, huge by ours; mutes the cosmetic mask of Mediama under her gypsy kerchief. Mediama perches on the edge of her Salvation Army armchair, telephone poised on the coffee table between her knees, staring past the black receiver into a glass chalice of pink water. It helps her concentrate. Mediama is explaining the soul and destiny. She's warning Jenny about the Children of Light. Their leader, she says, is using the organization to deal drugs and bodies. The vegetarian restaurant where Jenny works for free, or rather, in exchange for cosmic awareness, is a front. I've suggested this sort of thing to Jenny myself, obviously with less impact. I'm not really listening, though. I'm worrying because Nicole Caine insists on seeing me tomorrow. I'm afraid she'll talk again about giving me the money I need to complete my New York film, *A Small Bite of the Big Apple.* Right now I couldn't snap a picture without automatic exposure.

Jenny collects her sweat shirt and skintights; she's off to yoga. I watch her back the Toyota out of the stall outside our front door, one of a dozen matching doors in the treeless courtyard. Jenny insists we live in Clareview to save every penny. Not eating meat and never going to restaurants or movies helps. Jenny's not sure what the money is for, but it will serve God. Jenny is so anxious to serve God it keeps her awake nights. Should she join Mother Teresa in India? Once she was half-packed for the journey when a local psychic predicted ill consequences.

It could be last week or next week, last year or next year. Everything's the same. For those caring to keep track, it's two months after Dr. Bindek's workshop. I'm inside now, in Directives Management Section. So it's the same drive home up the Cap in rush hour. The same folding of clothes or mending of sticky cabinet doors before Jenny hustles off to yoga or one of her cult survivor groups.

I'm standing at the door watching as she gets into the Toyota. I lift my hand and wave as she shifts from reverse. I'll never see Jenny again. No more need to hurry. I look around the courtyard parking lot. As condo villages go, this one could be worse. The units here are cedar sided, with attractive overhangs. In the middle of the courtyard, stands a planter of flowers, now dead. In front of the condos it's mostly pickups, or battered sedans with big exhaust pipes. From the back bedroom window upstairs you look out into prairie. The land dips and falls in craters, an occasional stunted tree, reaching to the sky, blue emptiness curving to touch the last edges like some vast sphere. The condos, the pickup trucks, the two children from the home of neglect across the way, wandering naked by the road in summer, bootless in winter, the City clerk in her hot red Colt shrieking abuse at the door of the pipe layer whose jeep blocks her stall.

The children's voices call to me. *Simon, Simon, c'mon over here.* I'm seven years old and blood brothers with Tommy Chipps. His dad runs a plumbing shop, and Tommy and him drive around in their blue van with a sign that says: "Serving You and the Montreal Forum for Sixty Years." The shop is right next door -- to the Forum, I mean. We get into practices. I talked to Bobby Hull and got his autograph. He told me to finish school. That's not all Tommy and me do. We walk around after dark and write down street numbers, and I'm making a secret alphabet for a language only him and me will know. The kids on the other side of Côte Saint Antoine are waving for me to come over and look behind the big tree. They're in my school, but two grades ahead. They're waving. Tommy wants to see me, he's behind the tree, they say. Their leader is Rory Binghum. Even though I know they're lying, I go over. They push me on the ground for a pink belly. Then they pull down my pants. They say it's so the girls with them can see my dink. The girls lean over and look with big eyes. All of them look, like in those TV shows Ben Casey and Dr. Kildare.

It's a nice evening for a walk by the river. I go upstairs for a change of clothes. The sky over the barren prairie darkens, beckons. Through the bedroom window, I can almost see the increments of change.

I unlock the bottom bureau drawer. Under the pyjamas, I uncover shiny black leather of my gunbelt, dark brown grip of my Smith & Wesson protruding. Take the gun from the holster and tuck the barrel under my belt. The cold metal presses my belly. Lately, I've taken to packing my gun along on my walks by the river. I recall when Dad and I drove Took onto Mount Royal -- up past the mighty rooftops of Westmount. Took lay curled in the back seat, no longer able to dandle his tongue out the window. He whimpered once as I stroked his nose. Dad's gun was in my jacket pocket.

I'm almost out the front door when I remember the phone. One of Jenny's cult survivor clients may call. I go back to the living room and press auto answer on the machine. I zip my jacket, lock the door, head into the courtyard. Two miles by foot to the river valley.

I stop for a moment at the planter. With the flowers all gone, the children use it as a sandbox: winding roads, mounds of earth -- castles, perhaps, or cairns? I turn and step briskly toward my appointment.

My helmet, blue in daylight, burned dark purple as I skimmed by on the grass. High beyond the circling hedge, the streetlamp hummed. Everyone else had left the park, practice long since ended. I stayed behind, kicking punts. The more specialties I mastered, the better my chance of making the high school junior team the next year when I started grade nine.

I was trotting after a final punt when Paul Curtis stepped out of the shadows. He waved for me to join him. He was leaning against the big elm tree by the time I reached him.

Paul Curtis coached the West-End High juniors. His father ran a big sports store and knew lots of professional players. Everyone said Paul was the real coach of the juniors, even though officially it was Mr. Richardson, the guidance counsellor. Paul couldn't be head coach because he wasn't a teacher or school staff.

He was smiling in a strange way, as if there was some joke I didn't understand.

Graffiti dances on the crumbling walls as the fire roars. It's leaping from a pile of old furniture, leaping to the sky. A group of people crowd around, holding out their palms. I cross to the opposite sidewalk and hurry past. Two guys in a doorway shoot me a mean look -- but I'm dressed worse than they. Just minding my business.

Must have caught the wrong train at Times Square, IND instead of IRT. Or maybe I just missed my stop at 110th Street. I got off in Columbus Circle, heart pounding. It's after ten, and I'm a white face alone in Harlem. An acquaintance from Simon Fraser, wanting some action in the Big Apple, dropped into town for a visit. He found himself in Harlem, where a cop told him he'd be dead in five minutes. The cop drove him down to 116th.

I'm carrying a letter folded in my coat pocket. Anyone finding me with a switchblade between the shoulders may consider the flurried block printing of amusement. Dad says he's beginnning to wonder just what's going on with my graduate studies. He's phoned the Department and heard I haven't been to class in over two months. "I'm not supporting a bum and a drifter" he concludes, underlining twice.

I look in shop windows, nod to people. No one seems to care. A woman clutching a brown paper parcel smiles when I stop her; she tells me where to catch a bus for downtown.

The elm tree runs into the sky, into a single point like railroad tracks meeting on the horizon. I'm looking up the trunk, the back of my skull jammed against two sharp roots. Over the top of the hedge, from the corner of my eye, I see the steeple of Saint Augustine's Church. No one passes along Côte Saint Antoine. Somewhere far away in the dark grass, my helmet burns purple under the humming street light.

Paul Curtis is testing to see if I have any guts. This is how he picks the years' quarterback. The Kyle Odiggs. They fight -- punch, kick and tear at each other, or so Paul says. All we've done, though, is wrestle. He's over 250 pounds, so I don't have much chance of moving. I'm a little scared. He could have a knife or something. But I know what this is about. I know I can be quarterback next year, even if I can't throw a ball 30 yards.

There's an agency occupying a few filthy rooms over a greasy diner in the upper 80s: Everything You Need For Living Space. It sends you to rooms to share, mostly with gay men -- young actors wanting to know if you like Genet, old lawyers wanting to know if you'll serve champagne at their soirées -- and it finds you jobs under the table. I go and haul garbage and furniture. The company, featuring a 1940s truck, turns out to be a front for a couple of armed robbers. The senior guy, six ten, with a hook on one arm and stiches all over his face, gets robbed at gunpoint in the elevator by a midget with a pistol almost as long as his leg. On advice of my partner, I stash my day's earnings inside my sock, with a ten in my pocket if needed, to save being killed.

I drift into cleaning apartments. My contacts spread. I do university students, a masseuse with southern drawl and whining Hispanic lover, a couple of shysters running a therapy clinic, their princess daughters who, without raising their eyes from the soap opera, lift their feet like contemptuous cats as I pass the mop. Sometimes I'm out on specials. A woman in the east village, trembling like leaves, wants help picking up an apartment of shattered glass. As we work, she asks if I know what it's like trying to live with someone who expects to be treated as the messiah.

I hear from a feeble, dusty voice bidding me obtain various medicines and sweets. The owner of the voice turns out to be a wizened old man, houseridden, alone. He has tufts of baby hair reaching out unexpectedly from his crown, and a protruding belly like that of a starving child. He barely waddles away from the hall to collapse again in his armchair. I'm to lock up the door -- with four deadbolts and an iron bar braced into a metal floor seat. Wendel Birkin likes to eat apple pie and have his shoulders massaged with an electrical vibrator. I clean out the sodden cat litter and pick up after his apartment mate, a young black man who came through an ad. He never speaks. Sometimes a friend with greasy black hair and heart tatoos drops in. He's not much older than me, and likes to talk mysteriously of his allegiance with the Weathermen, that group of righteous politickers who planted bombs in Greenwich Village. Birkin waves his hand at this. He prefers Alan Watts.

Suddenly, Birkin asks if I know the song Jingle Bell Rock. Everyone knows Jingle Bell Rock, I say, elbows in dishwater. "I wrote it," he says, as if confessing to a murder.

One morning I check in with the Agency from the rusty pay phone in Tom's Restaurant -- my day's meal for $3.58 -- and the clerk says it's my lucky week.

"Got something in your line," he says. "Film studio. You can work up from floors to grip, from grip to sound, to ..."

"Soon I'll be in front of the camera," I say. "A star."

The studio's in a loft ten minutes from Penn Station. When I arrive outside the drab brownstone block, two people stand chatting by the entrance, a Puerto Rican whose delivery van idles in the lane nearby, and a gray-haired Caucasian with a shopping bag of vegetables and bread. A few feet from the hem of her coat, eyelids staring at the smog-hung sky, lies a black woman. Her hands stretch out, palms up, arms crossing the sidewalk. The next group of pedestrians steps over them, automatically. I go up to the woman and man. She's admiring his new black leather jacket. He turns to model the back, and she clucks her tongue with concern.

"Hold still," she tells him. She spits into her kleenex and rubs at the back shoulder, removing a spot of pigeon shit.

Maybe if I could have afforded a *full* bag of grass last night, I'd be too stoned now to notice or care. But I only had two joints before leaving my room. Money's tight since Dad disowned me.

"Did anyone check on this lady?" I ask them.

They turn to me with glaring eyes, as if I've interrupted a sermon in church, sat down in midst of the national anthem, questioned the supremacy of the United States of America. I kneel to take the woman's pulse. Her head, tied in a deep blue kerchief, falls to the side.

Renée is the name of the bubbly woman at the front desk. She has tightly permed mousy brown hair, all the style right now. She's red-cheeked and bright. She could be fresh from a theatre arts administration program, specializing in community healing and drama psychotherapy.

"Hi ya!" she calls, reaching for the foot-high desk lighter. It's in the shape of a penis; she lights it by stroking the shaft near the base.

This fits with the posters all along the corridor between the elevators and front entrance. Testimony of past winners from Home Run Productions: Lacy Way, Lunch at Delilah's, Ebony Juice and She Spreads to Conquer. Renée assures me there's nothing unsavory. It's all harmless soft core, seed money for the masterpiece Maxwell has been planning these past twenty years.

Maxwell seems to be the solitary genius type. He spends much of his time in the back bedroom surrounded by a drugstore of bottles and balms. Once or twice a week, on shooting day, he appears behind the camera, glorious in florid shirt, brilliant reds, yellows and greens, brimming with commands. Maxwell, who could be mistaken for Renée's father, makes you realize he isn't another sleazy filmmaker. Isaac Asimov is such a close family friend that Maxwell calls him Uncle Isaac. Maxwell, too, has a hankering for worlds beyond. His masterpiece is going to be another *Star Wars*.

One day I'm sweeping around the set, lifting myriad wires, when a pair of thugs appear at the front desk. A gust of Arctic air pours into the loft. Against the front desk murmurings, an ocean of silence thunders. Maxwell's pounding heart rides out from the bedroom, past editing equipment, away to sea. When thugs depart, Renée looks guilty. I shouldn't get the wrong idea, she insists, they're just distributors. "Distributors in mobster suits," I say. I ask if she's ever seen the movie *Seconds* with Rock Hudson. "There's America," I tell her. "You get in, but you don't get out."

"Don't take movies so much to heart," she warns. "They're just entertainment."

Next day it's business as usual. Maxwell presides on a stepladder overseeing a bedroom set. I'm up to my elbows in dishwater as two nude women with scarred faces plastered in thick makeup pad into the kitchen for soda water. One sounds cockney, the other Bronx; they argue over the best way to avoid drooping breasts. Later, in the editing suite, Maxwell declares the day's work a triumph of lighting and perspective.

A few weeks later it's summer. New Yorkers peel down to T-shirts and tank tops. Hideous Bermuda shorts parade up and down the avenues. Weather report tells anyone with breathing trouble stay indoors. School term ends, kids everywhere. I show up to the studio -- and now the corridors are bare. Summer has raked the walls of paper like last year's old leaves and litter.

At the now castrated front desk, Maxwell lectures to a nine- or ten-year-old boy on the mysteries of magnetic recording.

" ... and because of this pull, all the positive poles line up in one direction, and all the negative ones in the other. Therefore ..."

The boy nods his pudgy face at the demonstration recorder. Round eyes drift, return, drift, return. Finally he asks to show me his cowboy guns.

"Sure," says Maxwell. "But remember, Buddy, you wanna understand the movies -- just ask the old man."

Maxwell and Renée have to go out, so babysitting's added to my day's duties. Sheldon is determined to handcuff my wrists, rope my ankles, shoot my brains out. His chaps snarl in the Hoover. We make a deal -- he'll help in return for an ice cream at Penn Station when we're done.

We empty baskets and dust together. I ask him what he thinks of the studio. He shrugs, then goes off to collect dishes from the bedroom.

Sheldon is staying two weeks, like last summer and the one before, part of Maxwell's divorce agreement. Mother, father, and father's new girlfriend agree on the story -- documentaries and industrials. Maxwell has made several of these, enough to discourage Sheldon from wanting to see more.

I wonder what he's up to. It's been a while, come to think of it, half an hour.

"Psst," I hear someone call. It's Sheldon, waving from the editing suite. He's secretive, conspiratorial. He ushers me over to a small screen on the Steinbeck editor. Maxwell was careful not to leave any rushes on the machine. But I notice a tall stool underneath the metal shelves where last week's footage is stored. One of those reels sits in place on the Steinbeck; the film winds its intricate course around spools, through channels, to the pickup reel. Sheldon presses play. Eyes wide, he looks from the screen to my face.

"Well?" he says.

For low budget, the lighting *is* impressive.

Light peels into the dusty room, splintered by venetian blinds into tiger stripes which cover my hands on the desktop. Mr. Merrit paces in front of me, waving a big book. The other headmasters peer from chairs across the room.

"You realize not just *any* boy can be accepted at Lord Barrington College," Mr. Merrit says in his actor's voice from Camp Napawingue entertainment night. "You'll have to think very hard, now -- and answer very carefully."

Dad has been the one working hard so far -- pulling strings, as he says, to get me this entrance examination. He and Mom have been fighting over it for weeks, one of their many fights involving me, which Dad denies they ever have. He could go on not speaking to her all year and think everything was fine. They were speaking last night, though. I heard through the wall of their bedroom.

"You're prejudiced," he told her. "You've got these high-minded notions. Things aren't always equal, just because you wish they were."

"All I know is that he's a shy NDG boy," she said. "And the only thing they care about is blood."

It was tests all morning. Now Mr. Merrit wants me to explain the meaning of a quotation. It would sure please Dad if I got in. He's having his problems with Buddy. Just last week a police officer drove by to deliver a summons. Buddy is charged with vandalism to the Van Castle home in Point St. Claire. They think Buddy wanted revenge for being fired from Camp Napawingue after a drunk. As soon as the police officer left, Buddy threw the summons across the vestibule; it skidded over the boot bench where we sit to tie shoes and gave a rasping sound as it dropped to the tiles with the day's unopened mail. I remember how I once prayed for Buddy to get fired.

Mr. Merrit wants to know if I'm listening at all. He says he'll start again:

O, who can hold a fire in his hand
By thinking of the frosty Caucasus?
Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite
By bare imagination of a feast?
Or wallow naked in December snow
By thinking on fantastic summer's heat?
O, no! The apprehension of the good
Gives but the greater feeling to the worse.
Fell sorrow's tooth doth never rankle more
Than when he bites, but lanceth not the sore.

Mr. Merrit stares. The headmasters stare. One of them, balding like an eagle with white tufts above his ears, has watery red eyes that sting and burn my face. I hear the clock ticking loud.

"Well?" says Mr. Merrit.

I don't know, I tell him. I don't understand.

Dad, who hates me for being too stupid to make Lord Barrington College, must be happier now that I tell him I'm the junior team quarterback. Along with this breakthrough, I'm feeling good about something else. The grade nine art teacher has sent my portfolio to Emily Carr School in Vancouver, recommending a scholarship when I graduate. I told only Mom about this. Dad doesn't think art has a future. He does say he'll get out to see one of my games as soon as the International Chiefs of Police Conference winds down.

We lose our first two. Last year's players, who won City with Kyle, begin grumbling. The front line, anchored by Big John Donnelly, doesn't give me much protection.

"Get tough with those guys," Paul tells me. "You gotta take command."

Big win over the next team, I'm starting to feel confident. Working for hours every night with a weighted ball and bar bells, I've gained strength. Plus, I'm six inches taller than last year when I made the team on guts and pity -- mine and theirs -- a benchwarmer.

Mr. Richardson decides it would be funny if we scrimmaged against the seniors. First huddle, Big John leaves before I call "break." I catch him by the shoulderpads and push him back in place. He stares in disbelief, and so does everyone else. I'm amazed as well, but the adrenalin is rushing through my body. We complete a pass, then another and another. With two eighteen-year-olds chasing me, I race around right end. I've never run so fast in my life. Touchdown. I imagine Dad on the sidelines. But after the International Chiefs of Police Conference, he was called away to Ottawa by Interpol.

Next time we get the ball, their coach yells, heaping insult on insult. Mr. Richardson chortles and pokes Paul Curtis in the ribs. The senior coach gets even redder. How can they let a bunch of fifteen year olds whip them like this? On the very next play, last year's Carnival King bursts up the middle, and we fall; we bounce on my right arm, shattering it so that when I look down, one of the bones presses out the skin of my wrist, like the tent wall at camp Napawingue when a broom handle falls against it.

The doctor who finds me lying on a trundle cot in a basement corridor grabs my right hand and pulls. He pulls and pulls, but the bones won't snap back.

"Okay, then," he says, "we'll operate."

I'm three days in hospital after the operation. Several times a day, a nurse pricks my fingers with a needle. Nothing. Doctor says I may not recover feeling right away, perhaps never.

I wait for Paul to call or visit, but he never does. He says he hates hospitals, because he has to go once a month to get his groin frozen. Sometimes when he's walking along with you, his groin hurts so much he has to fall behind and nurse it. That's when he's not picturing the greater disasters that could befall him: getting shot in a bank holdup trying to rescue a captive, crashing in a sports car, being pushed around the rest of his life by his girlfriend in her blonde wig ... I still don't see why he can't at least call.

But instead of Paul, Buddy shows up. He's working these days in Verdun, at a boat upholstery factory-- a good thing, he says, they don't make the bottoms -- and he's driving taxi. Dad's ashamed of the cab; he forbids Buddy to leave it in front of the house. But Buddy says cab is a good way to make contacts and catch the drift. A good way to keep bad company Dad says, meaning the pimping that goes on.

Perhaps one reason I couldn't get away from the Carnival King is because Buddy kept me up the night before drinking at the Alsatian Tavern. The old pot-bellied waiter wouldn't serve me at first, but Buddy said something to him about bets, and sure enough the beer flowed. Buddy kept asking me stuff about Paul Curtis. Buddy's been going around talking to other kids who used to play for Paul. One of them told about Paul's groin injury, and how the pain comes on so bad that sometimes when you're walking he has to drop back and recover. Buddy says Paul's got a different problem altogether, a sicko problem. This girlfriend in her wig -- what's under that wig, Buddy wants to know. Furthermore, Paul is surely using me to impress Dad so he can get a reference into the Kaniwaki Golf Club. That's what Buddy thinks. But he doesn't say anything about Paul now.

"Don't worry, big guy," he whispers.

As he walks away from my hospital bed, he turns back, drops one hand as if holding out a hose and pumps the other by his hip. He's firing Steve McQueen's sawed off shotgun. Wanted Dead or Alive. We used to watch it together all the time. Buddy blows away the gunsmoke and winks.

The scholarship comes through, on condition my talent develops into graduating year. I never follow up on it. With right hand numb the next two years, I'm expected to turn left-handed. I'm clumsier than ever. I don't even try to draw or paint, though the art teacher keeps bugging me to. "You'll learn new things from that side," she tries to tell me. What does she know. I'm a righty, and that's how it is. I never liked art that much, anyway. It was a hobby. But maybe if feeling comes back by college I can still make pro ball.

In fact, I never try football again either. Can't even watch it on TV. It's not that I'm scared of getting hurt. I think it's because of what happened to Paul Curtis.

Those days in hospital when I was mad at him for not visiting, he was in hospital himself. He'd been found in NDG park under the big elm tree, mauled up so bad from baseball bats that doctors expected he might not make it. Well, he made it -- into a wheelchair. That's where he'll stay for the rest of his life.

Mr. Richardson phoned with the news and said Paul would appreciate a visit from me. As I hung up, Mom came from the vestibule with a letter dated four years ago. It was stuck between the wall and the boot bench. How, she wondered. I shrugged, remembering Buddy's summons. The letter was from a woman with our last name, wanting information to explore her roots. Mom laughed and dropped the letter in the garbage.

"Your father is utterly indifferent to that sort of thing," she said. "Maybe if he were less so, he'd have the sense to know where we aren't welcome."

By this time it was unusual for Mom to be out of her bed and downstairs at all.

We kill the bottle of St. Émilion, her choice. We're sitting on the hard wood floor of her art gallery, soft music dissolving last traces of the world below, the women wrapped in fur, the men armored in three-piece gray, strutting the sidewalks of Madison Avenue to the honking of horns and grinding of gears. I'm still taking in the glowing water colors of her headliner, Abe Crystal, former Disney animator and producer, frequent contributor to the *New Yorker*. It's a departure for Caine -- this Norman Rockwell gesture -- after their last exhibit of subconscious crayon from Paris, the pre-adult; but the critics approved. Everyone likes a guy that can draw the moon on water. Even shows a social nerve with the bag lady against the Mercedes. And how about that Big Apple street mood, those striped awnings, hot dog stands, pigeons in dusky New York rain.

There's some brown scrap paper by my leg. I'm fiddling with it when I suddenly have a strange urge. For the first time in seven years, I pick up a pencil and start to draw. I'm starting to forget Nicole. I cover the paper, as if scattering a vial of rust. Noting her interest, I shift hands; now I'm using both at once. She thinks the right hand says sorrow and the left forgiveness.

I'm wondering how it's going to feel, after the satin sheets of her bed behind the tranquil stones and sweeping gardens of Grammercy Park, going back to my room in cockroach wonderland -- that once-upon-a-time palace to artists. I'm wondering what lies in the old dump still that she should risk her life.

Judith joins me on the front porch.

"Whatcha doin, squirt," she says.

"Looking at the street light."

It's round and white against the soft summer sky, like the moon. This year Dad only sent me to camp for July. I get to be home for August, and tonight's my first evening looking at the clouds from our porch.

But Judith starts talking about soldiers going to war. She gets that misty look, like when she's reading her movie star magazines. Judith loves going across the street to dinners at the Bruneaus. This is partly because she loves what she calls elegant dining, because she loves anything French, and especially because she can look from Colonel Bruneau -- who always dines in a silk smoking jacket and ascot -- to the portrait of Colonel Bruneau in his Second World War uniform.

Judith is most of all in love with John F. Kennedy. A war hero, she reminds us. She loves to say his name over and over, at least ten times a day -- "Mr. Kennedy, Mr. Kennedy, Mr. Kennedy..."

Mr. Kennedy is not letting those Russians push us around. He's going to stand up to them in Cuba, no matter what. It's looking like a war, Judith says. It may be a few years, yet -- then I'll be old enough to go. Buddy is too insubordinate, and stoops too much to look good in a uniform, but I'd look good, Judith says.

Soldiers sticking bayonets into each other leap to my mind. The crazed sweaty filthy faces of Jamie Meegan's Sergeant Rock comics. Jamie loves war comics. He wants to go to war so he can die for God and go to heaven. I won't read his comics any more. Three times now I've had the same dream of lying by a smouldering fire when enemy soldiers open up with machine guns. I want to tell Judith about this dream and how scared I feel but she won't listen. You can't talk to Judith. She's nice, but all you can do is listen.

The two Bruneau twins pass by. They're tall as Judith, now, but they won't talk to us any more, just to me sometimes, because I know French, sort of. They've joined a group at their school that believes like the FLQ. They have a fleurs du lys flag in their bedroom window. One evening I heard them arguing with the Colonel. "I fought for Canada," he tells them. "*You* did," they sneer. "We have our *own* ideas." Father says it's too bad they've caught the political bug when they were such nice young girls. I remember the winter, when I still came up to their hips; they made sure no adults were around, then pushed my face into the snow till I was gasping. They glance over at our house now with what looks like a sneer. Soon, they say, our whole street will be French. Someone with taste will buy our house and make it decent again.

Judith hardly notices the twins. She's staring at the street lamp, dreaming of soldiers in uniform. I run inside.

The scream is long and piercing. Seated at the rickety card table, wrist on the cold tin surface, I stare at a rectangle of green-painted glass, my window.

He's trying to kill me ... somebody ...

Cold silence and it comes again, spiralling up from the courtyard thirteen floors below. The courtyard awaiting Woody's mop, according to Tina's statistics, awaiting the full moon.

Fire, fire.

I wonder again where he came from, my predecessor to this room, who chose paint instead of curtains. Maybe he lived in a hut, no smaller than this space, but grounded; cool earth, window free. Maybe he just couldn't take the view, smokestack smear across the silver line of Hudson River. Perhaps olive green has religious significance. Perhaps it's the only colour left to him. Perhaps some curse accrues with direct rays of the sun. I would like to know.

Help ... somebody ...

It took me the better part of an hour to scrape the top part of the window; to scrape it clear with a razor blade. Darkness presses there now.

Help ... he's trying to kill me ...

Against the dark upper window, I sometimes imagine an angel gazing at me. I can never quite see her. She's there, a hint of green, out of the corner of my eye.

I roll another joint. There's also a bottle of rye on my table, a glass, half full, and a sketchpad, tableaux for the movie I will never make about this building near the iron gates of Columbia University and the streetcorner bonfires of Harlem.

The sky explodes, wailing. I'm nine years old, drowning on my porch in falling sky. When you drown, you're alone. I can't even think where Mom is. It's afternoon. Dad's at police headquarters. Not even the police can stop this. They're going to have a war, and this is the last siren to tell us we're all going to die. They're going to drop bombs on Montreal and melt it like my box of chocolates Jamie Meegan threw into the incinerator at Camp Napawingue. The people burn. All of us burn. Like those pictures of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Twisted charcoal. Human smudge. Like the frog Jamie Meegan sprayed with Off and torched while the other boys hooted, cheered, and screamed.

I go to the window. I must get around to scraping the lower half. It shudders up under my pressure, the usual shower of paint and dirt. I peer out, the courtyard below, shadowland of crisscross porches, hooded doorways, blackened windows -- painting by Edvard Munch. A flashlight beam bounces across the trashcans and toothless walls.

Help, she wails. *He's got a blade.*

Maybe it's the cops shining the flashlight, maybe a neighbour, maybe the one trying to kill her. In any event, no one's going into that black courtyard to find out. Chances are, no one has bothered dialling 911. The only tenant phone is Mediama's, floor seven; she's usually on it, forecasting to clients in Hollywood, expounding metaphysics between romantic predictions to young women from Latin America or the Islands. Last week Jenny Monsoon dragged me down for a reading; three gunshots popped outside the curtained window as Mediama explained linkage of oversouls; she never missed a beat. It's like an airplane overhead, Jenny said afterward. Live here awhile, you just don't hear it any more.

So that leaves the front desk, staffed after hours by Mr. Kay's second in command, known to use his position for breaking into tenants' storage cupboards.

I clip down the hallway, past the washroom where my neigbour digs in the basin with a spatula, cursing people from countries with no idea where to defecate. In the elbow joint under the sink, someone has placed a human face sculpted from hair.

"Let the chips fall where they may," Mediama would say.

Waiting for the rickety elevator takes too long. I take the stairs.

On the ninth landing, the biggest cockroach I've ever seen lies upside down, dead-turtle style, like the one in my never-to-be-produced film script. I stop to measure it against my shoe. Eight inches. I'm thinking about omens when I round the next corner and see the body lying head first over the seventh floor landing. It's the Nigerian. Maybe he ran from his room after the deed. No sign of the knife or razor blade, but the blood throbs steadily from an eight-inch slash across his forearm, coiling from stair to stair like a slow-motion snake. His face hangs as heavy as it ever did when the eyes were open.

I use my shirt as tourniquet, wrapping it around his left upper arm. Laying him flat on the landing, I'm about to dash downstairs when he stirs, notices the tourniquet, and begins to pick at the knots. He manages to loosen them, but I have two hands to his one. I tighten the shirt again. We struggle back and forth, him to release, me to constrict.

A voice rises inside my head. I've heard it before, but where?

You stay with him. I called the cops.

He goes on picking at the tourniquet. I pull his hand away. He passes out.

I turn and see Jones, army jacket flapping as he bounds toward us from the landing below. He smiles at me and nods.

"Something tells me you got a bottle in your room," he says in that familiar voice.

When the cops arrive, Jones and I go upstairs for a nip.

The door of Dad's downstairs study is shut, but not really. By pushing, we make it open. So it wasn't locked tight. So it's okay, really. We both turn sommersaults on the thick carpet, me and Marie Bruneau. Soft against our cheeks. Tickles. Marie laughs. She lands on me, laughs. Chubby, Judith says. Marie's Mom keeps her tied on a rope like mine does, but we can meet in the driveways between our houses. Marie likes to run at me and throw her arms around. At first she scared me, because she's much bigger, but we're friends now.

Marie runs up to the picture on the wall. It's a picture of Dad in his mountie uniform with other mounties. There's mountie hats, billy clubs, big black boots.

"'Gardes, Simon, 'gardes, Simon." She squeezes her elbow, pointing harder. She touches the glass above the horse.

"'Gardes son fusil."

She touches the glass over the holstered gun.

Beside the picture is a medal for the police essay contest, and two pages from the essay. Soon I'll be big enough to read what they say. Dad's told me the essay talks about police in Canada. Police in Canada are peace officers. In the USA, they're forcer officers. Dad's essay tells how many people got killed in the USA with guns.

"Hey, let's see your papa's gun."

An ice cube turns around inside me. Marie pulls on a big drawer. I'm happy because it doesn't open. But Marie pulls on another drawer and it does open. It smells like wood, erasers and glue. Marie puts her hands inside and papers rustle. She holds out a key and grins.

Marie puts the key into the other drawer and the other drawer opens. It smells leather. Inside is black shining white shadows like my shoes when Dad makes me shine them for Sunday School. Marie puts her hands inside and lifts. The gun belt falls against the desk with a clunk. My tongue sticks to my mouth. Dark brown wood and black metal look out from the holster. Marie laughs and laughs. Oil smell rushes up my nose. Marie holds the gun. She needs two hands. Marie aims at me. Marie turns the gun and the little round chip on the end touches the red comb in her hair.

Dad opens the door. Dad shouts and takes the gun. Dad throws me over his legs and hits and hits and hits.

Waiters tear from table to table dashing down orders. Another busy day in the Bagel Chateau. Abe Crystal leans his cane against the arborite and opens the coffee-stained binder Nicole coaxed out of me.

A pimply waiter bustles over. "How's my son," Abe roars, handing out a cellophane wrapped cigar.

When the waiter runs off, Abe nods at my work.

"I like this. It's different. Nicole says you're ambidextrous?"

I tell him about nerve damage. For three years, I couldn't use the right hand much.

"Nice -- we can use a gimmick like that."

Abe says with his arthritis, he needs younger legs. He needs the right partner. He says we can start with a kids' script idea about Uncle Mistletoe. He dashes Uncle Mistletoes on the place mat. The main character is Pinocchio Jones, a boy with a long nose -- cashing in, rightly, on established appeal. Abe says we have to start with the marquee, then hit the classics. What worked works. Your plot from source A, subplot source B.

We do a storyboard, five minute demo, hop a plane to LA. Abe has lists, contacts so deep we could spend six months and never get through them.

Abe's eyes, watery with barbiturates and pain, steal a moment's serenity as he reflects on my good fortune.

"Kid, your Big Break has come."

The waiter, with white towel swaying over his black sleeve, pours more Blue Nun in Mom's glass. Dad chews silently, grim. The Windsor knot of his dark blue tie rises and falls. I'm in a jacket and tie, as well. Everyone has to be to eat in Ripple Cove Dining Room on Lake Massawippi. Jacket and tie rules are big everywhere in the Eastern Townships. Dad got too furious trying to tie my knot because I was squirming, so Buddy took over. As soon as Dad left the room, Buddy swatted my ear and told me to goddam hold still.

Buddy's face lowers like a wolf's, his glasses throwing back fragments of Aunt Sophie's pink blouse.

"Don't gobble," Dad commands.

A man and woman at the candlelit table nearby glance our way. Judith screws up her face as if someone has stomped on her toes. She sits up even more prim. Even she has stopped talking.

Judith's on a diet -- she's always on a diet -- and she whispers that if I eat all my roastbeef and vegetables, and finish my dessert, I can have her dessert as well.

Mom sighs. Maybe she's thinking about the next chapter of the book she's writing on Eastern Townships history.

This summer is to make Mom feel better. For once Dad didn't send me to camp. He rented a fancy cottage with a fireplace in the centre of the living room and what Judith calls a panoramic front window view of Ripple Cove Bay. Mom and I saw a cottage we liked better, in a grove of cedars, with lots of swallows in the eaves, and blueberry bushes, but without the dishwasher and overstuffed furniture. Dad said we needed something more comfortable and convenient, because Mom isn't to work her fingers to the bone. In fact, she isn't to work at all. Judith, Buddy and I are all assigned chores, and Dad, when he gets down for visits, pitches in. I suspect the real reason we took this cottage is because the beds have expensive mattresses. Dad is very fussy where he sleeps.

We're cleaning up our plates. Soon the waiter brings desserts. I'm digging into my sundae, spooning up the thick chocolate sauce and whipped cream, when Dad tells me not to eat so fast.

"I'm not eating fast," I tell him, before thinking ...

Now Dad's on his feet, face red and thundering.

"You're eating fast," he shouts. "Get out of here."

The man and woman at the candlelit table aren't glancing now. They're staring right at us. Open-mouthed, the waiter is staring right at us, too. Everyone in Ripple Cove Dining room watches as I scamper out the door, pursued by a raging man swinging his hand at my bum.

I hear him hold up on the front porch as I race to the stairs and leap down, nearly sprawling as my foot turns under at the bottom. Nothing stops me. I run to the path along the lake shore and fly under the cedars. At the bend where the trees swell out from either side, I stop and scoop up a big rock; then I swing up into my favourite climbing tree. Soon I'm twenty feet above the ground, swaying in the evening breeze. I'm going to stay here forever.

When Dad passes underneath, I'm going to throw my rock down on top of his head and kill him.

The pimply waiter delivers Abe's smoked meat sandwich. His eyes water, bleary from his struggle into the restaurant. I tried to help with the door, but he waved me off in a grimace of contempt.

"You'll learn," he says.

As Abe munches, I think more about the book I've been reading, Richard Schickel's *The Disney Version*. I pull it rumpled from my pocket.

"This guy Schickel says Disney was an antisemite."

"Naw," says Abe through a mouthful of sandwich.

I tell him to listen:

"Walt Disney robbed the work of its soul... in its place he put jokes and songs and fright effects. He came always as a conqueror, never as a servant."

Abe throws down his sandwich and pounds the arborite.

"Walt Disney made magic," he shouts, a piece of smoked meat spouting past my nose.

"Sheer magic."

Calming down, he sips some water and mutters under his breath:

"Anyone who knocks that is just jealous."

Ribbons of ten-year-old blood trickle from my forearm. It's been five years since I remember biting myself so hard that blood came out. I'm burrowing down the tunnel inside the big hedge at NDG Park. I'm holding the black metal box, like a money box, that I found in the basement. Inside the box is the alphabet I made up to have a secret language with Tommy Chipps. Tommy won't be my friend anymore, because now he's friends with Rory Binghum, and Rory says my Dad's a pig because the Westmount police locked up Rory's big brother for selling drugs. I shouldn't care about Tommy Chipps. He's always saying nasty things about my other friends, especially if they're Jewish or Chinese.

I peek out through the thick green branches. I'm up to the old elm tree. This is the spot I picked. I drop to my knees, pull out the table spoon from Mom's kitchen drawer and start to dig.

The sweat drips down my back and arms. The skin around the teeth marks is turning blue. It sure stings when the sweat gets in with the blood.

Today was 90 degrees and full of humidity, so bad you could hardly walk around. Dad hates the hot weather. He paces up and down and snarls at everyone. At night he tries to sleep on the back porch, but then he gets mad at the mosquitoes. He could be at the lake, and so could all of us. We could go for a dip in the sunset in Lake Massawippi. But we left this morning before dawn. Buddy says Dad's embarrassed to be seen after his "performance" in the dining room last night. He's never blown up that way outside the house, although one time when I was in grade two he chased me upstairs with Tommy Chipps watching from the vestibule.

The chimes in the bell tower of Saint Augustine Church across Côte Saint Antoine begin to sound. Every day at eight this same slow tune goes through the air. I like it, even though it's sad, as if someone's dead or dying, as if nothing will ever be the same again.

Shuddering hand somehow manages to push the forkful of pie into his mouth. He chews, he chews. Then, in his thin, reedy voice, he thanks me for taking the initiative. He never could have thought to mention all the things that needed doing around the apartment, or where everything was for cleaning. I tell him no problem. There's just one thing I'm curious to know. Why does he still live here, alone, barricaded behind deadbolts and iron bars in a crumbling tenement with a war zone outside.

"Gotta keep close to the business. Those crooks try and gyp me of royalties the second my back is turned."

It happens to be Christmas time, main streets of Manhattan alight with gaudy displays, the whole city looking like Macey's front window. Three days later, Wendell Birkin is dead. His last check to me, for three months' service, bounces. I read him a silent passage from Alan Watts, invoking *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as I wait for the IRT uptown. Jingle Bell Rock.

Satin sheets and her $600 SleepRite feel simply amazing after torn flannelet and the lumpy thin pad of my cot in cockroach haven.

We're finished now, looking in each other's eyes as a robin chirps from the stone birdbath outside her window. Grammercy Park has its own private swimming pool, surrounded by tall stone walls and wrought iron gates. You could be at an upper state country home.

I want a joint, but it would probably bother her. So I make do with one of her Winstons. I stare through my smoke at the nouveau work on her bedroom wall. The apartment's as much art gallery as the art gallery. My eyes drift at last to a different sort of work looking back from the wall past the foot of the bed. Something about it seems familiar. The colours, shapes and lines are bold yet mysterious, suggestively incomplete. We seem to be looking through curtains, a window, at someone's face, perhaps a man, perhaps a young man. The style vaguely Picasso. Off to his left, a green ball glows, a stick figure lying over it, like some high steel worker fallen to the ground, splattered. I'm trying to decide what colour or method the artist used for the large 'S' over the globe and the stick figure. From where I sit, it almost looks like the canvas has been cut right through to make that S. Suddenly I remember Finny's pencil sketch. I ask her if this painting was displayed.

She pauses before answering -- uneasy, it seems.

"It was -- but no more."

I should drag my lazy ass over and see about that 'S'. Jones will be interested, if I remember to tell him.

Instead, I say:

"Let me roll a number, just a small one. I'm talking tiny."

"Go ahead," she says. "I don't care what you do -- just remember that stuff's illegal."

One mile south of the Rat Hole --itself a type of bridge according to City engineers -- stands the High Level Bridge, a stark metallic trellis fording the North Saskatchewan. Like the Rat Hole, it too is a genuine monument to the city. Local poets find inspiration rising from the dark water below. They could find extra inspiration tonight, with the moon so full ... except that it's thirty below and blowing dry snow like a desert storm.

For Katie and me, the Bridge has different associations. Last spring they sent us to a fatality. He'd slipped down the river bank and caught his leg between two girders. Katie and I estimated how many U of A students and other people had walked over his head as he called for help. We knew him from the Hill, a downtown hangout for street people: romantic benches overlooking the glass pyramids of the Muttart Conservatory, a meeting place for gigolos. He was just an old man who slept in cardboard boxes. Recently he'd migrated to the valley forest near the High Level Bridge. His feeble voice, all smoked out, could not have carried far.

Tonight it's mid-January. All around us is darkness. The headlight skims along the icy black floor of the Rat Hole. Our siren howls like a trapped animal. We're racing to a reported man in distress on the High Level Bridge. We're halfway through; a pale slice of moon dips into view in the dark distance, from above the tunnel roof, like a young offender riding the roof of a bus and peering upside down through the back window. We're into the open night again; it's no time before we're skirting the dome of the Legislature Building gloriously shining above the white Christmas-lit wonderland of the surrounding grounds.

A sharp curve to the right and we're speeding up the west-side entry ramp. Past my passenger-side window flies the statue of Constable Ezio Faraone, kneeling beside a child. The City is developing a river-side park here, in tribute to Ez, the first Edmonton police officer to die on duty since Constable William Nixon, shot by a loiterer near the door of the Twin City Transfer Company in 1919.

On bright days, you get dizzy speeding along the High Level Bridge: overhead runs the old railway line, long bereft of traffic; sunlight through the tracks splinters into myriad ribbons which flash between bars of darkness with the effect of a strobe. There's no such distraction tonight. The bridge stretches before us, an unbroken alley of ice. Overhead all is dark. The sidewalks, separated by towering griders from the road, are deserted -- except for a distant figure.

He leans against the rail, pensive, savoring a smoke, a deckside traveller on an ocean liner. As Katie slows toward him, I notice the ice caking his beard. Our tires squeak on the packed snow; I imagine they hear us back on the north bank. Sound travels when it's thirty below. The cold air smacks your lungs like a fist in the solar plexus.

Katie rolls down her window with another grating squeak and calls to him. His face as he turns to us is open.

Whatever was in that shit has really rocked me. The walls of the West End bending. Not so bad, till they start closing in. Faces swell, leer, scream, disappear. Sound riots, then reverses into silence drag me bare-assed over hot coals.

Jones Overcross appears, disappears, appears, disappears, face in front of my nose like some distorted image. Someone wails, something familiar about that chaos voice. Finny. Findlay Bird.

All he believes are his eyes
And his eyes they just tell him lies

I'm losing it. Face floats before me now. Someone's touching my hands, pulling my hands. Someone's hands are warm and wet.

What'cha holding back for, man. Jones and me , we'll be in your film. We'll help, man.

Try to move jaw, tongue, lips ...

Don't cha want us in your film?

I want out of here. Get away. I have to run.

You'll never shake it, Simon. Why not just do it?

I try to speak, but I'm in that nightmare where I can't answer, can't move, can't act .

My eyes were closed. Yes, that must be it. They're open now and I'm looking at someone. Sheepdog face, white blond hair, wispy beard ... Wait a minute, those are my eyes! Using my eyes, he's ... He can't ...

I'm on my face. My feet, I mean. Oh yes, just see me run. I'm not like they think. I move, I fly, invincible.

Streaking, speeding, wind flies in my heart. Heart pounds deep hollow drum pressure's rising ... I'm away from them all, up above ...

Grease face, Mediama, leans up close, cold cream everywhere. There's someone around you. Sunglasses on her head.

It splats. Slams mack truck steel wipes through nowhere i'm nowhere i'm lying hard black stick man egg man big red steel mack truck running over nothing joy but always can't hold clipclop clipclop check his tongue man check this crazy dude ran smack into that wall shee-it

"Put something under it."

Shit, her precious silk sheets. I slide a copy of her *Chatelaine* under the rolling paper. It's not like I'll spill any -- tobacco or hash. Both are gold to me these days. I lick the paper, spread it tight, and ah, that joyous moment ... That dusky deep smoke pyrns into my core. I'm alive again.

She's putting on eye makeup over at the mirror. I let my eyes go out of focus on the painting past the foot of the bed. The green globe swells and fills me. A lime salve cools my brow. Then I remember Abe and I'm troubled, heart beats harder, ganglia flutter.

"He wants me to work on some corny kids' story. Go to LA, you know. Do the rounds."

"Sounds like your Big Break."

"Exactly what he said."

Nicole's beside me now on the bed. I feel her arm warm around my shoulder.

"What do you want, Simon? What do *you* want."

I don't know what I want . I don't want to do anything. Just want to be. To be what I am. But I'm nothing. Nowhere. I'm thinking of Jenny again. She expects me to call later today. I may even have promised. Mediama says Jenny and I are right for each other: "Eye grows mightier as the soul unites." Everywhere I turn there's another me lost and looking for. Maybe if I stop looking, stop everything... I don't want to hear what she's going to say next, don't want, don't want ...

"You know, honey, I've got some cash I'd like to invest in something creative. Like, say, *A Small Bite of the Big Apple.*"

Lucy shakes all over with a bright jingling of silver choke chain. Leash rattles and peals on the old marble stairs. She smiles, as everyone knows dogs smile. Proud of her new shampoo. Proud of her new tartan coat. Lucy stretch-groans, then slumps on her belly -- tail sweeping against Tina's hip -- and looks down on the lobby floor for cockroaches. That big dead one from last week is gone, but there will be more.

Tina's writing in her Doomsday Book. First, she enters that last night was the full moon. Out back in the courtyard, Woody's mopping. Mr. Kay insists he keep some valuable of the deceased. Fair reward.

I'm vibrating down in the elevator. Suddenly, it jolts to a halt. Ninth floor. Doors suck open and the Nigerian steps in, left arm bundled in a sling. His face droops more than ever. Eyes search out for the enemy.

Wonder what Woody can find, anyhow. Always wore the same robes. Never seen to take a bus, never in Tom's, not even a quarter for the phone. Nothing. Nothing can be made of nothing. But Findlay Bird saw him last night on the roof with that sword of his. Yes, that sword -- which threatened my neck just last week. Maybe it bounced out of sight. Woody should check behind the row of garbage cans. Make a trip to the roof. The ducts could always use cleaning ...

The Nigerian gives that second look, pondering. I look down at the floor. Then up, into hot eyes

We touch bottom. Doors slide open.

Mrs. Zirra steps from her room off the front lobby, steps into the doorway. Today she wears a tea pot. She means extra business. Hands brace on hips. Mouth opens, belly out, air rushes in. Tina Crowe pauses, hand poised, set for the thunderclap.

I step from the elevator, eyes still pounding the back of my skull, shouting their inexplicable why.

I sit on a poplar log under the trees. Bushes surround me. Through the overgrowth I see patches of river, fragments of Clover Bar Generating Station. Black smoke clouds the sky, acrid in my nostrils. Smith & Wesson's loaded, safety catch released. I too shall be released. I lift the gun, cold metal kiss at my right temple. Cock the hammer. I've seen what happens when you let the bore slip, so I steady with my left hand. Gun barrel rooted like a jail bar.

Whispering begins. Someone calling to me, not from outside; from some faraway intimacy inside. A woman's voice. At first I think it's Katie. I remember her calling to the ocean traveller on the High Level Bridge, asking him why he wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing -- but something is not quite Katie.

"The phone," she says, "the phone."

I look around, lower the gun ... no one.

Looking back through branches across the North Saskatchewan, I no longer see Clover Bar Station. There, instead, stands a woman. A woman in a long green robe. A silver circle shines above her head.

Cigarette trembling in nicotine-stained fingers, Dr. Lovecraft paces to the board in his office, opens a felt-tip pen, and draws my brain.

Dr. Bindek recommended only one of his workshop members for further treatment -- me. He recommended this treatment be immediate. So they sent me first to a medical doctor who cancelled my appointments twice because of migraines; then, when his examinations were finally done, it was off surreptitiously -- no need to tell the little lady, says Chaplain Grink -- to Alberta

Hospital. My testers were various assistants, never the same ones, but all wearing owl-eye glasses, the women with hair in buns, and carrying note binders wrapped in business suit blue. No one asked me anything other than statistical information and medical history. It wasn't necessary, they explained. The electrodes so painstakingly glued to my skull would glean the whole picture as I listened to tones, watched lights, played with blocks, completed sentences, and viewed naked men, women and children, the males in various states of arousal. For the sex pictures, they wired my penis. When that part was over, the technician said, "I've had more reaction from 80 year olds."

Now it's four weeks later, the computer has hummed, buzzed and spewed out the picture. Has spewed out *me* . I'm a long spreadsheet which Dr. Lovecraft consults as he draws lines on my brain, indicating electrical patterns.

"I must warn you, Cst. Brainwaite -- this activity isn't exactly ... normal."

Dr. Lovecraft conscientiously colours in large bullets beside each of the mood words he writes on the board.

"The results tell me you're not the typical male gestalt. In addition, you're prone to mood swings, anger, perhaps hostility, depression. You could be obsessive. Perhaps the imagination's a little overactive."

Dr. Lovecraft pecks on his cigarette, which he must pinch carefully since it's burned down to his fingers.

"It's not my business to apply labels. I simply correlate. I suppose others in the field might infer passive-aggressive. Anyway, the thing to remember is this research has a remarkable validity quotient."

Dr. Lovecraft returns to his desk, avoiding my eyes, and lights another cigarette.

"I'm recommending Tofranil. We'll monitor you on that; if it has side effects, there's others that work as well."

This Tofranil, Dr. Lovecraft says, could dull my sensitivity a little. That's likely for the best. I'm better off without too much sensitivity working inside in Directives Management Section, where Dr. Lovecraft feels I should go for the next year or two.

He snaps on his intercom and asks if the next one is ready. Yes, next one's ready. He seems relieved at this, and almost smiles to the floor as he hands me a book.

"You'll learn so much about yourself from this," he says.

All About the Brain. By Dr. Lawrence Lovecraft.

I got my own watch, from Dad. I keep it in my pocket 'cause the kindergarten kids say it looks like a bracelet when I put it on, and that makes me a sissy. The big hand's at fifteen and the little hand's at four. Quarter past four. Or you can say four fifteen. Mom taught me. I'm smartest in the class at telling time. Today Miss Martin made me stand in the corner for looking at my watch when we were supposed to be turning in a dumb old circle. I hate holding hands in a circle. I hate Miss Martin. She's fat and smells funny.

It smells all different under here -- like bugs and dirt. You can find anything under here, under the old leaves. I hear a tick, tick, tick on the wood overhead. That's Took walking on the back porch. I'm under the back porch, in my secret place. No one can see me, but I can look out through the lattice and see them. The only scary thing is sometimes you put your hand down squish on a dead bird the Bruneau's cat dragged in. I make myself come in, no matter how scared. When I find a bird with its belly gone and little black dot eyes I make myself look close, and I push it with a stick.

It's mucky near the back of my secret place. I got the big rock and dugged and now there's a river 'cause Mom's been using the leaky hose and the water sweeps in under the lattice. I dig up a hard round lump from under the stairs in the sand, and put it into the river. It starts to float away, down to the back of my secret place. Near the end, the river goes two ways. One side runs out into the patio and Mom's garden, and the other goes into a waterfall down the stairs to the cellar door. When it rains, the water backs up in the cement stairwell and things float round and round and bump on the door. Once when me and Marie was playing hide and seek I went running down the stairs when I smelt something awful, and then I saw a rat turning round and round in the water. It had some white stuff in its mouth, and its tail was like a shoelace. Tommy Chipps would pick it up by the tail and swing it in your face.

A red light blinks on the answering machine.

The voice is Katie: "Simon ... Willard's going to the Mill. I'm heading over... Be nice to have you there -- if you've got the time."

Willard is one of those first-year guys up on charges of excessive force. He's a bar-rat, likely to brawl after five or six drinks. He promised Katie to stay dry till after the judgment at least. Let Willard drown in his own piss, I think. But it doesn't take much of a cinder to set off the Mill. So I lock up my gun and call a cab.

The little brown ship is sailing down the river. I have to make it go into the garden. I'm not allowed touching or paddling in the water. I follow over the river on my hands and knees and lean down and blow. I'm dizzy and a little sick in the stomach, but the ship won't turn. It's headed for the cellar stairwell. I'm so mad now I want to smack it with my hand, but touching's not allowed. I take in all the air I can hold, like a football filling up, and I give a huge blow. Blow them all out, Mom said at the birthday party when I turned five.

The nose of the small brown ship turns straighter. Now the wall rattles and rumbles, a rushing comes through my secret place. Mom has put on the hose to water the tulips. Water flows under the lattice; the ship goes faster like there's been a squall. The ship goes into the dirt where the river goes two ways, and sits there, trembling in the current, like one of those helicopter seeds that twirl down onto the back porch and stick under the mat when Mom points the vacuum hose.

Sgt. Cornelius Crook reports for duty at 0720 hours sharp. He checks that Bernice and Victor have no overdue work on their desks. Then he reads the *Sun*, focusing on Sunshine girl and crossword puzzle.

That first morning, he was in his office, pudgy back turned, arms bent to either side like turkey wings. He was staring out his window through his binoculars, noting irregularities in the Recruit Class marching their way up 103A Avenue: forage cap too high on the head, boots not shined, hair too long, crossing on a yellow light.... Sgt. Crook called out numbers for each misdemeanor -- register numbers of the culprits -- and Bernice, jotting them down, looked up at me with an apologetic smile. Sgt. Crook would offer this information, over his packed lunch of kippers, to nemesis Inspector Boyko of Training Section. Boyko, a farm lad from Saskatchewan, detested the UK members whom the Department had culled during a big 60s recruiting campaign. "Pompous assholes," Inspector Boyko called them, Sgt. Crook in particular. For his part, Sgt. Crook was known, from remarks in the Sergeants' Mess, where he regularly held forth, to view the Canadian members, especially the Ukrainians and the French, as "boobies, but not the sort you'd like to suck."

Setting down his binoculars, Sgt. Crook emerged from his office and said we shouldn't stand on ceremony. He'd call me Simon and I could call him Cornelius.

"Oh yes," he said, "I almost forgot -- over there is Victor."

I peer past two filing cabinets to a dark corner where Victor -- the Chief's newsletter editor -- looks at me apologetically, pulls off his thick spectacles, and polishes them furiously with a white embroidered handkerchief.

The red strobe of a squad car pulses outside the Mill when my cab pulls up. A crowd spills through the front door, two or three men separating Willard and his barrel-chested opponent. Two 'C' Division guys, both green, approach from the squad car. One says something to Willard . "Drive over," I tell the cabbie. He protests, I flash some bills. "I'll look after him," I say.

Everyone's standing around us in bathing suits, hooting. A closed circle imprisoning Danielle Bellefort and Simon Brainwaite. She looks at me. I look at her. We've met once or twice before, maybe said a few words. She's two or three years older, just another kid from a part of town where you go your separate ways. She's wondering as much as me what it's all about.

We're on the dock in front of the Letendres' cottage on Lac Lesterelle. André Letendre rises from his deck chair, the oldest, almost seventeen, already rich. His speed boat, moored at dockside, sways in the sun. Judith calls André debonair, such a ladies' man, dapper -- just like Napoléon. Once Judith dreamt she was the Empress Josephine; she and Nappy were doing breakfast, him in full uniform. Maybe André was cast as Nappy -- he's only a few years younger than Judith.

"Écoute!" he shouts. The talking stops. He explains in French, Québec French. They teach the European kind at school -- instructors from France, Algeria, Egypt -- with sneers for the sort of French that passes in our streets. So I only understand some of it. André nods.

"Et maintenant, mes amis -- the Plains of Abraham."

The crowd pushes us to the end of the T-shaped wharf.

"Your boxing ring," says André. "Out of ten."

"Je ne veux pas jouer," I say in the European accent they teach at school.

"Snob!" cries one of the spectators.

Danielle drives me suddenly backwards, into space, falling.

The cab heads for Willard. He glances our way, scowls, lurches back toward the door of the bar. Before he gets there, it opens; an elfin man appears. I recognize him as the Greek owner. He darts to the constables, but the constables are busy restraining the big guy. Fingering Willard as if issuing the curse, the owner screams at the constables. He plucks one by the arm. I remember this kid -- Stevens. They sent him into my unit, the Audio Visual Studio, when I was Acting Member in Charge. I recommended a transfer for Stevens. Too lazy, too dull, and too nasty-minded. Stevens whirls and raises his knee into the owner's groin. "Leave," I tell the cabbie. I jump out as the second cop puts the Greek in an arm hold. "He's the owner!" someone yells. They don't listen. Free of the constables, Willard's hulking opponent heads for the bar. Then his buddies step in. No one holds back Willard.

I'm on my way through the door, on Willard's tail, when Katie appears. "Flat tire," she smiles. Her coat is old and worn, she has a kerchief on her head. No makeup. Dark hair pulled back. She could be a 50s elementary school teacher, just stepped out for a loaf of bread. No casting director in the world would sign Katie to play a cop. If she removed her outer clothes, they might send her in as a workout instructor, all business, foil to the glamorous young ones. And me? Me they could cast as the bookstore clerk. Snuffed in the first reel.

The lake leaps up and swallows me like a fly. One to nothing. I surface from the slimy bottom to hoots and jeers.

"Bravo, Danielle. Craque ses dents."

André's sitting high behind the others, grinning. One of his hands is busy under the towel across his lap. His lips begin to pucker and gasp like those of a fish. He lets out a shriek.

We catch up to Willard. Table by a mezzanine rail. He may or may not recognize us. "Willy, it's us. Katie. Simon. Let's get out of here." He shakes off her hand. We look at each other, nod, sit.

The ruckus of pool and bar talk rolls on, like nothing has happened. Millwoods they call the Little United Nations. Some of that shows in the bar: East Asian, oriental, middle European, Mediterranean. "Tower of Babble," Willard calls the different languages, when he's not so far gone.

Katie and I push back our chairs, get Willard on his feet, but two scruffs close in, one on my left, one on my right. "Hey asshole," one says to Willard. The guy to my left has a knife scar over his left eyebrow. I remember him from an arrest, armed robbery. He doesn't know me out of uniform. In uniform, I'm just another fucking cop. "Chill out, we're police," says Katie. "We're taking him out of here." The guy beside her snickers. I pull out my badge and show the guy with the scar.

Even before Katie calls out I'm falling. I fall on my right shoulder, throwing up my left hand for protection. I see the flash of a knife.

I clamber up the metal rings to face her again. Sleek as an eel, she squirms from my grip, cuts down my knees, and we're rolling, kicking, punching. I twist back her fingers. Her teeth close on mine. Serpents of blood slither from our shoulders and arms. Slivers of wood lodge in my feet. Danielle catches one, too. It slows her. First one, then the other, we fall into the cold water, clamber back, fall once more. André shakes his head, as if clearing water from his ears, and presses down on the towel in his lap.

It's nine to nine and I'm stumbling backward. She leaps for the final push. My heel jabs down, her toes like little snakes crushed. She plunges into Lake L'Esterelle.

Everyone is screaming: "Maudit Anglais couchon, maudit Anglais couchon..."

It slices against my hand, but I catch the knife wrist. I catch the other wrist, too, as the first guy grabs my neck from behind. Then there's a dull thud. My first attacker drops, his knife rattling to the dance floor below. Stevens and his partner pull the first guy off me, and Katie slips her nightstick back inside her coat.

We take Willard home, quick stop at Emergency for my hand, and Katie and I find a quiet café to unwind. We're tired, proud of ourselves. I moved okay in there. A good thing I've been sending my Tofranil to the dump. We take a corner table by the picture window. The picture is Edmonton skyline: coloured lights, towers, a golden moon. For a long time we don't speak. When the wine arrives, Katie sips before asking:

"How did you know that guy was coming for you?"

"I didn't know."

"You were already ducking when I saw the knife."

"I wasn't ducking. I was pushed."

Katie takes a sip of wine and stares. I know that look: the fire of interrogation.

"Simon," she says, "There was no one else near you."

I don't reply. I just stare at the bandage across my left hand.

"Nasty cut," he says, eyeing the stitches.

"Doctors said to leave it undressed today."

I'm perched on the love seat. It belongs in the TV room beside Sophie's old boudoir. He's sunk in the easyboy, afghan across his knees. The easyboy belongs in the old living room, by the green marble fire place. Stray pieces of Montreal mismatched together in a cramped Toronto apartment. The old dining room table, solid oak, fills the dining area like a teenager squeezed into a child's pedal car. If tables had knees, the knees on this one would be touching the rough plaster ceiling. He always did look forward to an apartment after retirement. Much simpler, he said. Everything done for you. Mom was appalled at the thought.

Northern exposure. WIndows and patio doors further darkened by overhanging balconies, trees and sister buildings of the courtyard. Here on the ground level, we seem tucked away at the back of some cave. Only in Toronto would a drab, tiny two-bedroom be described as a luxury condominium and sold for the price of a three-story townhouse anywhere else. Why did you take this place, I want to ask. But I know. He's masterminding inheritances. He could have cut costs by moving to the Townships, those sleepy peaceful hills and hamlets of his grandparents, or even back to Winnipeg; anywhere except Toronto. But he's still a snob. Still the poor country boy determined to rise in the biggest of big cities. Still tied to Judith; still dreaming of the day she gives him a grandchild. Judith, separated, left Toronto for a bigger job in Edmonton shortly after he and Sophie arrived from Montreal.

"I've read the dirt on you boys ... and girls," he says.

The only time Edmonton makes national news -- meaning the Toronto *Globe and Mail* or *Macleans*-- is when our red-necks show, when the tornados strike. The *Globe* and *Macleans* both ran lengthy articles about policing perplexities in the western capital -- cops trying to murder their wives à la Hitchcock; cops forcing S&M; cops beating people senseless in bars; cops stealing radios, weapons and drugs from seized goods; cops dancing in drag on barroom tables ...

"Your poor chief," he sighs. "Seems like a good man."

Perhaps I could spark some joy by revealing Jenny's pregnancy. One more on the way, supplement to Buddy's six, seven or whatever. This one a girl, they say. He and I both partial to girls. But after the joy, there's always the despair. Usually worse than the initial joy. Buddy and his wife, divorced, have turned their children into a battlefield. So what good, really, in bringing up another pregnancy. Besides, I have my own agenda; I don't want incidental news in the way.

"So *what* brings you here?"

On the arm rest, his right hand trembles. He's already asked. Perhaps he's testing consistency.

Victor was alone when I stopped back for the book I'd forgotten in my desk, Underhill's *The Mystic Way.* At first I didn't notice him in his dark corner. It was well after five, everyone else along the hall had left. The book in my pocket, I was already at the door to leave again when I heard a slight shuffle of paper, a drawer close. He was staring down at his desk, looking kind of numb.

"Hi Victor."

His mouth quivered toward a smile, but his eyes were far from smiling.

"You okay?"

He nodded quickly. He said he was just having a talk with Cornelius. I found this odd, since Crook never stayed past three thirty if he could possibly help it. I was about to ask what was up when Victor became un-Victor-like and started to talk; to talk, that is, about something other than the weather or how much my fingers must have hurt from the knife wounding last night.

"I was born with a respiratory problem," he began in a slow, soft voice. "The doctors said I had a 99% chance of dying." He smiled wanly. "Here I still am. That's the problem, you see. I go to the bar, the waitress doesn't see me. I wave for a cab, the cab drives right by, splashing mud in my face. I call for information, they put me on hold and never get back. My whole life, I've been invisible. I'm not supposed to be here"

He looked straight at me then, and I realized how deeply blue his eyes were, hidden behind their thick glasses. Becoming more suspicious and even vaguely angry, I was about to ask what Crook had wanted, when the phone rang. It was Jenny, looking for me. Aunt Sophie had just called.

"Your father's had a stroke."

I explain again that I'm here on sympathy leave. He gives me that sour, disbelieving face. He says I look a sight worse than him.

"You're not cut out for this work," he says, "I always told you so."

"I know."

His right hand on the arm rest trembles more. Doctors described the stroke as mild, but Sophie says if he gets much worse, she'll need a nurse in twice a week. "We should both be in a home," she says. "One of those half-way deals. Private apartments, full-time staff." Tired of playing nurse, Sophie dreams of buzzing her very own paragon.

How she must dream of the old days in Montreal. Some say a mayor used to live in our old NDG home. It was Sophie's palace. I wonder how she stands the change: her closet-like room, too small for anything but a cot; dark, cramped apartment, non-descript building encircled by fast food joints and used car lots. The only plant , a rhododendron, sits alone by the window. Sophie waters it once a week. "Doesn't drink much," she says. "Not like some of us."

A nursing home wouldn't take kindly to that habit, I always remind her.

Sophie is out shopping. "You boys have your chat," she said.

He coughs. Long, hard, rasping. Then wheezes:

"Growing back that beard?"

I rub the stubble on my chin. Comes in fast, all right. Last shaved the night before Katie called me to the Mill. Now he's nodding. Soon he'll nod right off -- and Sophie won't be much longer. I must get on with it. The grandfather clock tick-tocks.

The bells have a safe muted sound through the snow. Dad's wearing his heavy wool trench coat, moonless night blue under a sprinkling of white stars. It's like Valerie's walking along with us, it makes me unusually calm. I've been waiting for this all day, because Valerie said to look at the new statue. It's by a world class artist, she said, so our church must have something going for it. I'm not really interested in statues, but the closer I get to it, the more I imagine Valerie.

As always solemn, gaze inward, Dad takes the stairs. I follow a step or two behind, proud of the admiring glances as we head toward our pew.

I'm 14 next Easter, eligible to go out for the junior high team. No one else knows, but Paul Curtis has me in mind for quarterback -- once I pay my dues.

Thirteen's cool. Dad says I can make up my own mind about church. This is my last time at church with Dad.

Up front by the choir, a Christmas tree reaches toward the vaulted ceiling. Its lights sparkle. According to what Dad said -- and he's on the board of governors -- that's where the new statue is supposed to be. I'm dying to ask him, but Dad is all business once he's at his pew. He's talking to God, and that's it.

The pews are filling up. I strain to overhear some reference to the statue, but instead it's just the typical stuff about trivialities. Everyone's well dressed, of course, in that rich conservative style of Westmount. The church itself actually straddles Westmount; it's across from Lord Barrington College on Empire Avenue, officially NDG. I guess this works well for Dad -- he can mix with the higher ups without seeming to overreach. Normally it just gives me a sick feeling to be reminded of Lord Barrington. But not tonight.

"You want to ask about that girl," he says, looking away.

"How did you know?"

"When something's on your mind, it's on your mind."

He stretches out his legs, leans back, eyes half open. For a moment they shut. Then open.

"Thirty six years.... I only made a couple of really bad mistakes. That was one."

Looking at the ceiling, voice just barely a whisper, he tells me how he discovered the inspector in charge of Training Section had been contacted by Judge Landor. The judge recommended that his daughter not be considered for a constable position. Further investigation showed that Valerie was within a sixteenth of an inch. She could have met the height standard by hanging from a bar.

"The inspector thought he was doing right. Landor was our biggest ally. You have to remember he was the only justice at the time talking stiffer sentences, convictions and parole reform. He was like Kennedy to you 60s kids. A hero. Did you know Kennedy nearly started a world war?"

Yes, I tell him, I know.

Fall on your knees
And hear the angels' voices
O night divine
O Holy Night ...

The singers and organ have hit their peak. The church reverberates still as the choir file down the knave in darkness holding their small candles. It's as if a line of fireflies was crossing the moonless sky.

Then it's over. The lights come back and people pull on coats and overshoes in the vestibule. As Dad talks with fellow governors, I notice Tommy Chipps leaving with his parents. Tommy's the kind to put on a good show for the adults. He smiles and asks if I've heard about *that* statue. What about it, I say. He flashes the learing look he uses for *Playboy*.

"In the basement," he whispers as his dad hurries them outside.

My dad's ready now. I ask him if I can catch up. I want to say hello to a few people downstairs.

I never even wait for his reply. I'm halfway down the stairs and my heart's starting to race. Not the big hall used for Sunday School and cubs. I remember there's a separate room toward the front of the church, with old paintings and coat racks in it. I approach the door as a man and woman come out, shaking their heads. "Disgusting," says the woman under her breath. She scowls as I go past, like I'm playing hooky, or spitting seeds, but it's not quite her place to tell me off.

No one's inside at the moment, just me and the statue. The figure's on the cross, right arm extended toward us. It's wearing a plain light green robe; it's head has fallen onto the shoulder in pain. I cross the room for a frontal view, and the beauty expands like catching that first glimpse of the mountains when we drive to Lake Massawippi; but it's a dark, final beauty, too, more like a cat holding a dead sparrow, or red ribbons on the avenue. Looking at the quiet figure on the cross, spear wound under her left breast, I feel something slipping away, and all I see is Valerie's small body mysterious and so impossible, denied by a gray ambulance blanket with its own red stripes, on the black roadside of Harvard Avenue.

He begins to cough. The fit takes over. The asthma is worse since his retirement. He snatches up his puffer and gobbles from the bore as his hand pumps the trigger. I go to the kitchen, pour him some water. His lips tremble as they purse to drink.

He looks at me now, just about spitting into my ear.

"She was a plucky young woman." He pauses, heaving for breath. I should tell him to rest, but I can't. I want what's next, even if it finishes him.

Sometimes I know I'm sleeping, I know it's just a dream, but I'm reaching out, almost touching Valerie's face. Valerie in a green dress, Valerie with spear wound, small body under my number 15 red football sweater at the foot of her cross, and I have to lift the sweater. I have to see. Her eyes begin to open and we're about to talk, always just about to talk.

I was living in a dive on Claremont, lower Westmount, the part you don't hear about. I'd moved from Montreal West soon after Valerie horrified Mr. James by flaunting her night over with the police chief's son. I no longer knew what to say to her. We met a few times afterward, sat in the park together, but walls of silence loomed between.

"Give it up," she said. "You'll fry your brain."

My Claremont apartment was much closer to the nightclub. I could bike there in less than an hour. I'd escaped the fussy prim style of my landlady. Instead of neatly spaced flowers out the window, I had no window. The outside world entered through sound. The bass player upstairs grunted, thrashed, clattered and squealed so loud with one-sight stands I thought the ceiling would collapse. Underground passageways were another entry point. I had a rat whose hole led directly into the lopsided oven. Friends who slept over on the couch cried out against the rat. Especially Jimmy, a diminutive waiter from the nightclub. Jimmy had grown up in St. Henri, in the Irish Catholic war zone between French and Italians. Worse than the beatings from street gangs and school priests was the nightly ritual of huddling under coarse wool with three brothers and a cousin as the darkness echoed with rat feet. Sometimes the creatures scurried right over the children. One night when he was five or six, Jimmy was bit on the toes. He was more afraid of rats than anyone I have known; more phobic than Winston Smith in *1984*. This fear left Jimmy impotent when it came to rats. He could no more act against them than I could complete a film. Revolted by the thought of poison and the smell that would come from the walls, I set a trap. I came in one night from the nightclub to a long black shadow on my kitchen floor; a motionless shadow with a twisted shoelace tail. The only thing that stayed the same in my new home was prison identification.

Like my former landlord, the building manger -- a squat Italian -- had numbers tattooed on his forearm.

The night Big John called I was back at the old house on Harvard. Dad was out of town at a conference, Sophie was with her sister in the Townships, and Buddy was back for a few nights. He was upstairs watching Twilight Zone. I was sitting on the broadloom by the fireplace, sipping gin, remembering. Then I opened *King Lear*. I remembered one day in English class Valerie recited:

"Robes and furred gowns hide all."

I decided then I would make a film of the play, all taking place in Montreal, with Lear a big-shot from Westmount. I hadn't heard of Peter Brook. Then the phone rang -- three times before I answered.

"If it's for you, tell 'em fuck off," Buddy yelled down. "My babe's supposed to call in ten minutes."

Big John never sounded like this -- so serious, so afraid. He told me Valerie had killed herself. Her family was issuing a short release. She'd taken pills. Perhaps it was accidental. She'd been a little depressed, was drinking a little too much. She'd mixed some pills and alcohol.

"Listen, Si -- something else: she sent Donna some journals. There's all kinds of poetry and drawings."

Dad pauses, gasps. Again, he coughs and I pat his back.

"They never got the real cause of death," he rasps.

He takes three more shots of air from the puffer. He sighs. His voice is smoother now, less punctured.

"I reviewed the reports."

He swallows some more water, puts the glass back on the end table.

"She used a ... shotgun. His shotgun."

I find myself standing by the window, looking out the patio doors.

"Most unusual choice for a young female -- in those days."

Unlike Clareview, there are trees. Old trees, with furrowed faces. I'd forgotten how autumn leaves back east blaze with colour. Reds, oranges, yellows. The reds so deep, rich, and brilliant -- it's like watching my first technicolor movie. For colour larger than life ...

"There'd been a complaint. Neighbor said the man next door was beating his wife. No followup. But later, after your friend died, the mother went through detox. We questioned her up one side, down another. Seems he was beating on her all right. Also seems his relationship with your friend was improper. At one point he had her committed. Ordered shock therapy."

"Maybe the wife was lying."

"She volunteered to take the polygraph. She wasn't lying."

"But no one got the bastard."

He looks away. He reaches for the puffer, hesitates, then pulls his hand back and runs it across the remaining hair over his ears.

"The Solicitor General and some others said, 'no, you can't do that'."

He coughs, almost like a laugh. "Imagine if you'd known!"

He looks at me, eyes steeped in pain.

We sit in silence a long while, then he says, "I've done a lot of thinking, just sitting here. One of the things I think to myself is why the hell we moved that statue downstairs, just because Christ was a female."

I tell him we don't have much choice when it comes to political decisions.

"Remember that day you put Took to rest," he says.

I tell him I remember.

"Me, too," he says, "I just want to die."

None of her family knew me. There would be nothing else. No funeral invitation. No memento. No further calls from John and Donna. I didn't know where she was buried.

I found a Bible and read a few lines ..."yet I have not forgotten..." And my eyes wandered back to Lear *"and take upon us the mystery of things, As if we were God's spies..."*

Buddy's been watching me from the foot of the stairs. He's come down for more chips and beer.

"Got turned down, huh?"

I ignore him and he passes to the kitchen. Buddy doesn't know anything about Valerie. No one does. He may have seen her that time in the jazz club, just another young woman. Later that year we were driving in his cab, stopped for a light, when Valerie crossed in front of us. Fortunately, she didn't notice me.

"Nice knockers on that one, " he said. The light turned before he could roll the window down to wolf whistle.

Now he comes back from the kitchen, bowl loaded with Humpty Dumpties. He turns on his heel, remembering something.

"Dad was s'posed to leave me some cash. He tell you where he put it?"

I tell him it must be where Dad always leaves notes and money, in the top drawer in the vestibule. Buddy charges in there, opens the drawer, and curses.

"Forgot, " he wails, "forgot, forgot!"

There's a pile of mail on top of the dresser; I'd been thinking to check through it, but then who ever writes to me, especially at this old place. Buddy slams down the bowl, swings his fist and sends a rain of envelopes across the room. They splatter against the wall and slide down behind the boot bench like broken eggs.

It's after dark when I leave. The courtyard winding pebble pathways and flaming trees gives an illusion of country. You'd never believe yourself surrounded by city. I think of the movie *Being There*. We open inside a stately house, surely a country mansion, with beautiful antique furniture and gorgeous garden. Here a cramped apartment, hardly a country estate, but Aunt Sophie does keep lovely roses; put her in one of those embroidered gowns on the love seat, or sit her at the oak table with the silver candleabra, and you'd get the same effect. The estate owner dies; his simple-minded gardener is told by lawyers he must leave. The gardener steps outside the house -- and enters a slice of inner city: tenements, litter, junked cars, drug dealers, blasting horns... I step out of the cobblestone laneway, lined with ivy walls, and experience the same juxtaposition. More or less. This is still Toronto, so I don't see much litter; nor does O'Connor Drive display tenements, junk cars and drug dealers. Not quite yet. Swarming traffic, grubby stores and indifference are enough. After twelve years of Edmonton -- essentially a small town -- I'm back in the big city, remembering Thoreau's words: never so alone as living amidst a million strangers.

I wait for a bus to Victoria Park Station. From there, subway downtown, then bus to Scarborough. Scarberia, Torontonians say. It's grisly suburb, lots of cold, presumptuous houses. Very lovely at the buffs overlooking Lake Ontario -- a sort of miniature Cliffs of Dover, I'm told. But I won't have time for sightseeing. John and Donna are expecting me around 8:30.

When my eyes cracked open, a cockroach, heaving like a jellyfish, was crawling up my leg. I shook it off and staggered to the can. Was my purple face a psychedelic trip, or had I really been run over by a Mack truck? A faint voice repeated in my head, "you're okay, Si, you just ran into a wall."

After I got the blood off, I staggered to the elevator and rode downstairs, intending to get some brain killers at the drug store.

"Hey Brainhead," I heard Mr. Kay shout. "C'mere."

If he even suggested a vodka, I'd die. But when I made it up to him, he just shook his head and stuck a letter in my hand.

... to the nuptials of Donna Katherine Hinx and John Phillip Donnelly

I crashed with a school friend, also friend of John's. "What luck," he said, "you're in time for the stag."

They held it at the old Alsatian Tavern, now a strip joint. Legs à Go-Go. Educational opportunity for west-end school boys, said my friend. We found Big John presiding at a large round table in one corner, with a nice through angle of the stage where, in an hour or so, Amazons from the Moon, scantily dressed owing to the heat of interplanetary travel, would stride forth and conquer.

Big John was already free-wheeling. "Simon, Simon, I can't believe you made it, man." He insisted on giving me a bear hug. At one point, as the others jabbered about car engines, he leaned toward me, lowered his voice, and became as serious and respectful as being half-drunk and delerious with self-importance would allow. "Those journals, man -- you've got to see them. I mean, it's been two years."

He suggested I stick around for another three weeks, allowing time for the Miami Beach honeymoon. Then we'd sit down and block out the film.

"Sure," I said, looking at the doorway. I felt a cold wave through my gut . Big John's best man. Kyle Odigg. He walked in -- as Carly Simon might say -- like he was walking into a yacht.

Nor did he enter alone. He was pushing a wheel chair in which sat Paul Curtis. As they neared the table, Paul squinted at me, like a suspect he could not quite place. After Mr. Richardson's call, I'd visited Paul ... once. I'd never gone back again. He frowned, then looked away from me. Kyle deposited Paul at an opening, a few chairs away. Then he crooned to the man of honor:

"Johnny!"

Kyle had become an oozer of charm. He went around the table reciting everyone's name. Till he hit me. He shook his head, stumped, peeved at this enigma sent to undermine his talk-show rhythym.

"Simon Brainwaite," someone chortled, as if to say, can you imagine!

"Shit," muttered Paul Curtis, turning for a second look.

"This tall bearded stranger," Kyle exclaimed, "Little Simon Brainwaite. It can't be."

We knocked back our booze as Kyle dropped offhand details of life in London, Paris, Buenos Ares, Madrid, Naples, Rome, Nairobi, Brussels, Tokyo ... After a few Bradores, Paul moved closer to feel me out, as if poking the asparagus and dubious cream sauce with a too-fancy fork. He'd heard I was into films. Yes, I'd shot a few scenes, I said. Student work. Leaning forward to whisper, he told me, aghast, that my face looked like shit.

"Hey big boy, I'm talking to you," Kyle said.

Big John's chin had sunk into his chest. A maudlin look clouded his face. "Sorry, I was just remembering ... you know ... Val..."

Kyle stabbed his finger at John's nose, reprimanding a child.

"Drop that shit. Drop it now. This is *your* night. Tomorrow's *your* future. She checked out. Didn't want to stick around. Couldn't be bothered to try. Why should *we* bother to remember."

I stood up, knocking my chair back onto the floor.

"She'll be remembered a lot longer than you, jerkoff."

Even drunk, I was amazed to hear anyone say this to Kyle Odigg. I was especially amazed that someone was me. Paul Curtis was staring slack-jawed. Apparently Kyle was no less flabbergasted. He needed a moment to adopt the right attitude. Recalling advice from Jimmy and my other waiter friends at the nightclub, I decided the wisest course was distraction and surprise. I tossed an ashtray-full of cinders and butts in his eyes, then waded in. No one was too seriously bleeding before the bouncers tossed us out onto the street. I think it went on out there. I may have ended up on Kyle's chest slapping his face like a crazed drummer. I have this wavering picture of Paul Curtis looking on from his chair, lifting thumbs up while Mediama's voice intoned *the eye grows mightier as the soul unites*. Or maybe that was just a dream before I awoke on my friend's couch to learn that Big John had called.

"You can't go to the wedding," said my friend. "He says sorry -- but you understand."

I asked if he said anything about a film.

"He just said he wouldn't see you for a while. He hopes it cools off in time. "

My head has never hurt anything like it did that morning. The room was not only moving, it was moving in three directions at once, like the salt and pepper shaker at Belmont Park.

Donna hangs from the ceiling in a wicker chair, a tropical plant spreading its fronds over her head. She seems like a bird peeping from its cage. A crow, perhaps. I don't know tropical birds. She sips her herbal tea and smiles. Somehow I feel it's a forced smile. I notice a flutter of the eyelids, a nervous tic.

"Soon as Johnny made it legal, everything changed," she says. Forced brightness?

Big John -- no longer Big John but Jonathan Delaney Donnelly -- leans forward for his doughnut. He's still Big John -- Bigger John -- if waistline is considered. The leather couch murmurs. Smile of contentment. He brushes the icing sugar from his cheek.

I used my friend's phone to call Mediama. Turned out Jenny was with her, getting another fortune. Mediama put her on the line.

"You sound like hell again," she said.

I told her I'd been in a bit of a scrap.

"Great. You run into a wall. Then you disappear on me, right out of the city. And now you're in another fight."

"How'd you like to leave New york for a while?" I ask.

Revenues at Donna's clothing boutique doubled. A bequest sailed in from Donna's great Aunt -- as I can tell from "some of the nice things." I suppose she means the Persian carpet, the antique vases, the Alex Janvier over the couch. The Scarborough address.

"We were hoping for Westmount," says Donna. "Miss the sound of French. It's so soothing, even if you can't speak it. Politics ruins everything."

"More tea?" says Big John.

I'm drowning in the stuff. Along with booze, they've banished caffeine.

"Sure," I say.

I went straight from headquarters to the airport, bought my ticket for the next plane to Toronto, and looked out over the runway as the PA announced departure overseas.

That night in my Toronto hotel room, I dreamt I was driving Valerie's Camaro, crawling along, as she ran by the roadside. Always footfalls ahead. No matter how hard I stepped on the gas, the Camaro remained at fifteen clicks. But then we reached a decline, I began to gain speed. At the valley's bottom, she stopped. She looked in through the passenger window and spoke. I couldn't hear, but I read her lips. Or did my best to. Lips in an "O," then wider, then wider, then tight. From somewhere deep inside, as if from the bottom of Senior Bay, I caught the sense of her voice. Floating. It came like the sound of plunging into water long seconds after you see a distant figure dive from a cliff.

"Amazing, this tea," says Big John. "It seems so mild, yet it's really very powerful."

"Helps you sleep," says Donna.

I ask about the journals. The big film plans.

"But that was so long ago," says Big John.

"Twelve years?"

Donna pulls in the leg which has been dangling over the Persian rug.

"Simon ... please don't take this wrong ... we just don't think we can make Valerie public."

"*Her* instruction," says John. "When you and I talked about a film, I never realized Valerie had written Donna a request against showing the journals to anyone. Even me."

"But you saw them."

An anxious look from Donna to John.

"I'm a snoopy bastard. Gets me into all kinds of trouble."

"Sure," says Donna. She snorts. "You wanted to know if she lusted after your fat ass."

Caught with his hand in the cookie jar, Big John gives an "aw shucks you got me" look. He suggests some music -- Vivaldi or Gregorian chants?

Great white fish eye staring bigger, staring closer, sucking me away into light, nothing but light. Voices call out around me. Glucose, glucose... Someone far away inside the light, waving, green, silver stars, reaching for me, reaching for her, the mask, spilling dice from a machine up my nose to black.

I wake up, queasy, throw up, wailing -- right hand won't wake up. I watch them push the needles in like my hand belongs to someone else.

From airtraffic control I watch the runways thick with blind flyers. They've lost ground control. Indifferent to what I might say. They jostle and duck and swerve. Mostly they march along like army ants. I press buttons but nothing; just new faces jumping on my TV screen. I look down on chaos.

I'm not really in airtraffic control. I'm in my Toronto hotel room, twenty stories up, looking out through a sealed window on a sealed populace of night crawlers. It's bars, cheap hotels, women in doorways. It's ugly down there, grays, browns and flashing neon. Cars streaming like debris after a flood. It's post apocalyptic. It's just that the towers haven't quite fallen.

Body builders with punker hair point rocket launchers at each other. I flip channels. I hear about someone's sex change complicated by multiple personalities. There was a vote: four for the change, three opposed. Who said life was easy. One more flip, a travelogue; view of the Eiffel Tower. It makes me think of the Rat Hole. I shut off the TV.

The hotel is your usual impersonal affair. I lie back on the bed, stare at the ceiling. Perhaps I should get out the Scotch. The phone rings. A woman to see me. For a moment dread seizes my heart. Tracked down in only two days ... I picture Jenny leaping from the elevator, rocket launcher poised. When I peek out the door, it's not Jenny. It's Donna.

Donna is the sort who seldom makes eye contact, even with her line of direction. But she looks me straight in the eye and weaves my way. I smell the rum before she gets inside. I shut the door. I lock it.

"Sorry I couldn't offer you a real drink this evening," she says.

I find the bathroom glasses and pour two Scotches.

His finger wiggles from the sleeve of his army shirt and he chuckles.

"Took that lead in Korea," he says. "Good excuse at long last to save my hide."

We clink glasses. My snot-green window's open; below us crawls the silver Hudson, smudged in the steady black belching of smokestacks.

"I ain't Black," he says. "I'm Cherokee."

When they called him to enlist, he said he was Cherokee, and they wrote down Black. In other words, send this one to the front.

"Straight up," she says. "Double."

When I turn with her glass, her head is in her hands. Tears run between fingers. I sit nearby on the bed and count the windows in the office tower across the way, as many as I can see. Donna begins to gasp and sniffle; I pass a pillow case so she can wipe her eyes.

She notices the window, wobbles over and looks out.

"Not much of a view."

I join her, pointing the TV control. I aim at the people below.

"I've been trying to make them obey," I push buttons. "This thing lost its juice."

She laughs, voice cracking upwards.

"You always were nuts."

I offer to take her coat, but she can't stay. She turns her back to me and looks out the window. I sit at the table behind and doodle on a pad. I'm drawing worms in granny glasses sitting in a circle.

"I've always hated ... I mean I've always been afraid of your eyes. How you look at people. You seem to know when they're lying. You knew we were lying tonight."

"It wouldn't take a genius to know that."

"Sometimes you make me feel I'm lying when I don't know myself. I don't know if we're fucked up -- or you are."

I'm walking down Fifth Avenue, smelling vegetation from Central Park. It's sunny midday. I'm not drunk or stoned. This is amazing. I keep thinking about my conversation last night with Jones. With two of us on the wine bottle, I don't feel a trace of hangover.

A steady flow of people passes up and down, voices rising and falling. I'm still thinking about Jones when his voice rises, too. It comes like a whisper gaining flesh until it's a full-blooded in my head. I don't even look around. I know he's nowhere near. I'm getting used to this. He repeats one word:

Brother, brother, brother.

"I used to think Valerie was never fucked up. She looked after me, her little Donna. Anyone gave me trouble, Valerie was there to sort them out. She knew the answers. I thought."

"Me, too."

"Johny thinks I went to a movie -- a women's thing .... I don't suppose you'd like to fuck?"

Today, for the first time, I'm in *his* room He's got the cap off the wine jug, but I'm not paying my usual attention to that. I'm staring at the walls, the famous paintings. Not exactly what I'd first imagined -- which was something putrid, pathetic, fluoresent on velvet. They remind me, now, of Rembrant, Durer, Velasquez, Picasso. Studies of faces, city life, country sky. Critics would say exquisite. There's something else about each, a light that seems to shine out from the picture itself. And always somewhere discreet, missed at first, the small stick figure signature.

Jones did these in the joint. They got him for bringing some grass in from Mexico. He was with a Yaqui woman. Her people use peyote, grass, it's religious, like for Rastafarians. But they put him away for three years. And he did this.

"Not much else to do in there," he says.

Jones rolls a small joint, tobacco crumbs gathering on the left-arm sleeve of his army shirt, as if drawn to the crevice like droplets to a draining sink.

"Listen, bro. I got a story about me in Korea, in that war. It's not just about me."

She turns to face me, waits. Then she laughs and takes a bottle from her pocket. Mouthwash.

"Some people drink this stuff, don't they? I'm not there, yet. I just use it to gargle before I go home."

She stuffs the bottle in her pocket and turns back to the window. With her baby-soft hair and slim build, she looks from behind like an awkward teen.

"Heard about her father?" she continues.

"Yeah, he's a senator."

"Yeah."

Her voice is soft, muffled into the window, almost too muffled to hear. I stare at my drawing to concentrate.

"He's got them."

At last I look up. She is shaking. She gives a loud wail. I remember a woman in the back of my squad car in labor. I go over and wrap an arm around her shoulders, squeeze her wrist. Someone's rapping on the door.

"It's all right," I shout, "leave us alone."

Donna leans into my arm and trembles.

"The car, the house, the furniture. My business. Johny's job. All of it. Everything. His."

The trembling has eased. I slip my arm free, sip my Scotch.

"Shit," she says. She stares into her Scotch. She throws back the rest of her glass. It sobers her.

She cracks her glass down on the table, picks up the Scotch bottle with trembling hand, and pours another shot.

"You got a smoke?"

"I'll phone down."

She tells me forget it. Then she grabs my arms and shakes, as if forcing understanding.

This time when she sticks the needle into someone else's hand, I cry aloud with pain.

"You're going to feel again just fine," says the doctor. "It's going to tingle, and you won't have good control at first. But give it time."

Donna is reaching inside her coat when the latch turns, the door bursts open. Two security guards step into the room.

"Okay, folks -- what's the disturbance."

"It's cool," I say.

"He bothering you?" says one of the guards.

Donna says she's just visiting, and no, I'm not bothering her. She says she's on her way home. The guards exchange a look.

"How 'bout we see you to a cab?"

Donna shrugs, one of the guards takes her wrist. At the door she stops.

"C'mon," says one of the guards. He tugs on her arm. They're outside the room when she shakes free.

"Leave me alone," she says.

The guards exchange another look, then do as told.

Donna turns, pulls out a brown manilla envelope. She tosses it my way before a guard shuts the door.

The envelope lands at my feet with a smack.

I put the phone down, I'm standing over him.

"I'm so sorry," he says, "You must have had bad news."

"Forget it, Victor. Tell me what Cornelius wanted."

To my surprise, he tells. He says he's been keeping his diary in his drawer. It never occurs to him to lock it up -- no one's even noticed his diary before, never shown the slightest interest, least of all taken it from his own desk. But Cornelius went looking for a file, helped himself to Victor's desk, and got into the diary before realizing it was private. And then, well, he just had to keep reading, and reading-- day after day after day. He's already reported matters to the Chief. It was his duty.

"He says I need to see the Chaplain, do stress workshops, go out to this Dr. Lovecraft..."

"Victor," I say, patting his shoulder, "Just hang tough for a few days. When I come back, we're going to fly this Cornelius Crook from the flag pole... by his cock, if he's got one."

"La Province de Québec ... Bienvenue."

The blue and white sign with its fleurs du lys does funny things. My throat tightens. It burns, the tears well in my eyes. Home-but-not-home. I press on the gas.

Soon I'm racing toward the lights of Montreal. Cross the bridge at Lake of Two Mountains. The banks of the river flame red. Imagine these woods hundreds of years ago, Mohawks skimming along in their bark canoe.

Warm night. Indian summer. Smoggy air whips through the window; moist, fetid, dripping humidity. I breathe again. Along with the red leaves, I'd forgotten the rich, wet dirty air. Never adjusted to dry prairie with make-beieve oxygen, no-alcohol beer. Everything there so sharp and clear. Here moisture soft-focuses, colours bleed. Minds bleed.

Nearby on the passenger seat the manilla envelope gathers flecks of rain. Last night in the hotel room, I reached in without looking and removed one page of one line: *Today my father is a claw. What the claw did. Clitoris.* I couldn't go further.

I crank a handle and the windows close. One drop here, another there. Soon the windshield's dappled. I snap on the wipers, dissolve into their steady beat.

I follow the signs for Dorval. Soon through the rain it's the distant lights of the airport. I weave and wind to the meter parking. I tuck the envelope inside my jacket, like a kitten, and pace through the rain, splash through the roadside puddles.

I ride the escalator, buy two coffees in styrofoam cups, sit at a small square table looking out on the mezzanine. Strangers pass, clipping inside themselves, wrapped up like the baggage they whip along as though saving it from thieves.

I leave the coffee and cross to the lounge seats looking out over the runway. I sit and watch the planes take off. Reds and blues, signal flashes, scatter in rain. The runway teams with lost colour, teams with darkness. A warning light flutters.

The envelope lies on the plastic-covered cushion beside me. I'm thinking how I went for the river with my gun. Sitting there, sitting here forever.

They send us to scout the river. You, you and you. Black face, black face, black face. Rest of the platoon , they stay back. Okay, we say. No problem.

We get to the shore of that river and suddenly the enemy, they come out of nowhere. They start shooting. Shooting those rifles at us. I think my two partners get killed. I never see them again.

I dive onto that river, onto the ice. I'm digging with my hands in all that snow and ice, like it's sand on a beach. The bullets are coming everywhere, chewing right by my legs. I feel one get me through the arm, but it's like I never *even notice. And what do you know, now there's a hole. There's a hole in that ice and I'm inside the river now. I'm swimming through that freezing cold water.*

Pretty soon, I'm thinking I'm better off shot full of holes. There ain't no opening in the ice up above. Can't swim no more, can't breathe ... but suddenly there's a hole up there in that goddam ice, there's sky through that round white hole and we're coming up for that sky.

Apologia -- *The Rat Hole*

> "... the clear-sighted have not deceived themselves, not lulled themselves with the deadly illusion of progress."
>
> - Michel Waldberg. *Gurdjieff: An Approach to His Ideas*.

One of several figures lying beneath the surface of my manuscript *The Rat Hole* is Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff, a sage or charlatan, depending whom you read or believe. Gurdjieff asserted that "every phenomenon, wherever it occurs, results from the meeting of three different or opposing forces or principles": affirming, denying and reconciling (Waldberg 97).[1] I consider the affirming force of my manuscript to be its dirty realism and revelation of unexpected pearls beneath the mire. The denying force can be felt in a wide range of features identified with modernism: disturbance of spatial order, ambiguity, obscurity, primitivism, irrationalism, structuring by symbol and motif rather than by narrative, subjective narration by a disturbed, solipsistic outsider type, and existential opposition to the modernist project so aptly defined by Albert Borgman as aggressive realism, methodical universalism, and rugged individualism (22).[2] The reconciling force in my narrative flows from influences arising from life experience -- including English 584 where this manuscript took shape -- and postmodern explorations of genres.

In her book *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon writes about "regional" novels that they have a "double pull" toward documentary realism and toward symbol and metaphor. "This could be a seen as a way of domesticating or taming the unknown," she says, "but on a more positive note, it could also be a way to articulate and give voice to a relationship with the land" (196). A very important goal for me in *Rat Hole* was to give voice to relationships with Edmonton. I have lived in this city since 1978, have worked for several of its organizations, and have come to know many of its present and past idiosyncracies. I'm struck by how much the city is misunderstood and how infrequently portrayed in the writing of Albertans. I also believe my current home provides a wealth of metaphoric possibilities. The manuscript really found itself once the narrator became an insecure loser based in Edmonton.

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[1] The so-called Law of Three is also discussed in *The Gurdjieff Work*, Kathleen Riordan Speeth; *In Search of the Miraculous*, P.D. Ouspensky; *The War Against Sleep*, Colin Wilson; and Gurdjieff's own writings, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* and *Meetings With Miraculous Men*.

[2] These features are cited by Astradur Eysteinsson in his study *The Concept of Modernism* (74). "Outsider" is Colin Wilson's term, from the book by Camus, for the alienated figure of existentialist literature.

Often I hear it said that Edmonton is "a city without a soul." With West Edmonton Mall, its brash motto *City of Champions*, its history of doublecrossing Natives and prospectors alike, its dependence on industry and government, Edmonton is indeed a triumph of the modernist project. Richard Pevear says of Dostoevsky that he "perceived in the social displacement of an imported culture a more profound human displacement, a spiritual void filled with foreign content" (XI). In Edmonton, *we* are the foreign content: intruders, appropriators, divorced from our original cultures and hardly at one with our new bleak surroundings. Yet we are here, and therefore -- so it seems -- nowhere. "The capital of Alberta," says Mordecai Richler, "is a city you come from, not a place to visit. ... it seems not so much a city as a jumble of a used-building lot, where the spare office towers and box-shaped apartment buildings and cinder-block motels discarded in the construction of real cities have been abandoned to waste away in the cruel Prairie winter." (Edmonton Journal, O 85) By implication , "a city without a soul." And here is the special challenge. Nowhere must gain distinction, respect, recognition for what it is, the antiself, the shadow, of somewhere.

To its credit, Edmonton accepts this condition; even legitimizes it. Edmonton goes about quite contentedly with its Prairie anti-culture of honking through the Rat Hole. In this blue collar, transient, country-and-western tinged town, the absence of culture as defined by Europe and Eastern Canada has become culture. It's a culture of cracked cement, pickup trucks, pickup bars, blue jeans, first names for oil executives and premiers, and mayoralty races in which the candidate who fumbles and stumbles on camera like a real person gets elected. This culture stands against the arrogant East, the great beyond. Wit and the bon mot have little place. Simon is safe here. No one ever becomes a somebody in Edmonton.

To portray this anti-glamorous, anti-romantic setting, the required mode is what Fredric Jameson calls "dirty realism." It is the harsh, uncompromising idiom of William Burroughs, John Hawkes, Charles Bukowski, Henry Miller, the bug- and rodent infested worlds of Kafka and Camus. They choose their words to evoke the fallen, the abandoned, the disgusting; language suitable to describing the scum on the surface of the modern pool. Edmonton and Alberta may as well be evoked in a similar way.

Jameson suggests that documentation of gritty scenes brings together the post-romantic mode of realism and that of naturalism. With naturalism, nobility of subject diminishes, squalor and determinism increase. There *is* a deterministic mood to Edmonton. We boom or bust as outer forces dictate. We wait for the world to come to us, to acknowledge us. We see ourselves acted upon, not acting. We sense our automaton condition.

Despite these currents, I view my treatment of Edmonton as an affirmation; however ugly or failed, the city's image in *Rat Hole* claims an identity and voice. It becomes a character whose grubby "evil" asserts its opposite, as Bataille argues in *Literature and Evil.* It is my validation of a unique place too often overlooked and deplored, especially by its own inhabitants. Being seen as undesirable, it becomes a potential ally of the *obyvatel,* " the man or woman of the street whom we may call good people" (Waldberg 15).

As to specific parts of the Edmonton setting, I included the fictionalized police department for reasons additional to knowing its actual model. The police institution seems highly resonant of the modernist project with its insistence on law and order. My aim was not to attack or glorify police work The department is simply part of a society where forms of warfare are always afoot. My fictional police accept this and do their utilitarian best. Most importantly for my concern with Simon, they do so by striving toward high levels of judgment, competence and responsibility.

Given Simon's relationship with his father and Valerie, it may not entirely surprise us that he falls into this career, a wrong job to match the other wrongs in his life. With its paramilitary approach and discipline, this job is the most inappropriate a person with Simon's temperament could possibly undertake; it pushes him toward his limit in a way that other jobs could not. Why is he really in it? Where will it lead? I was more interested in these questions than in attempting a comprehensive portrait. Perhaps I will do more and better by this particular subject in future work. The police element does, I think, contribute to the mood of cynicism rising from the underside of society, where the police officer must walk. Details and textures of police experience, at least as seen by Simon, deepen the picture of "dirtiness."

While this use of dirty realism in *Rat Hole* legitimizes its regional setting, narrative point of view has the opposite effect of denying, hiding, confusing, and depersonalizing. This helps to release the metaphoric sense of the city as a modern wasteland linked to the other wastelands in the book: Toronto, Montreal and New York. Within these worlds, people are naturally seen as wastelanders. Michel Waldberg, in his book on Gurdjieff, argues that a great many modernists, such as Chateaubriand, Balzac, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, and Rimbaud, shared Gurdjieff's view that most people are "irresponsible... totally subject to their own automatic behaviour, incapable of developing even the embryo of a soul" (5). Waldberg quotes ample evidence from all these writers, including Baudelaire's opening lines of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and a diary excerpt: "It is impossible to read through any newspaper, any day, any month, or any year, without finding on every line the more frightful signs of human perversity, alongside the most astounding boasts of integrity, goodness and charity, and the most brazen declarations concerning progress and civilization" (6).

Simon, like Kafka's Georg Bendemann in *The Verdict*, feels impotent in the face of the modernist project; for both characters, this project is epitomized by a status quo father. Like Bendemann -- and so many others in the existentialist canon -- Simon spirals toward self-inflicted death. He is the shadow of the accepted, official force of success and progress. He is Lagerkrvist's vile Dwarf, hating the successful people around him. But he is also the narrator of Camus's *La Peste*, a man striving however futilely toward good, toward survival in a world beseiged by corruption of all sorts at all levels.

Simon carries on the Romantic Age's first person point of view, a subjective, personal voice that grows increasingly dark and impotent in the modernist experiments. It's a voice I know from reading, but I would have found it in any case; it comes with the territory of this troubled time. Homi K. Bhabha describes the condition behind this voice when he refers to "the melancholic homelessness of the modern novelist" (Collier 204). Simon belongs nowhere and can find a real home nowhere. He drifts and responds rather than acts. Avoidance, escape, procrastination and powerlessness govern his narrative shifts. Simon's discomposed mind shows the effects of heavy drug use and drinking; but also the deeper sense of aimlessness, of having no real honest direction or purpose, in a world without authentic systems of any sort. Simon sits in the airport and watches illusions come and go. This point of view, as Eysteinsson says, contains "social experience that contradicts the official ideology of coherence and progress" (37). None of the modernist experiment works, and Simon like so many of us, isn't sure what does.

This problem, as Colin Wilson suggests in *The Outsider,* is the problem of our age. Where to for the gloomy, hopeless social bug, the misfit, the man from underground? Where to for the offical world that spawned him? Critics like Peter

Collier may well ask whether modernism is played out (1). How many more wastelands can we bear; do we need another book in which the protagonist decides there is no meaning and self-destructs. Yet, truthfully, how can the juggernaut described by Borgman really be expected to halt. Surely more than our weariness of cynicism is needed. With my writer's reliance on personal experience, I know the dark age has yet to die. If we consider all that modernism entails, we know this to be so.

With its worship of science and technology, modernism leaves the arts to whoever has time to "waste" on such enterprises, spiritual ministering having passed from institutions to rebel individuals. But individuals, as Gurdjieff argues, are a mass of contradictions and self-ignorance. Reflecting the splintered state of their society, misfit artists can do no more than reflect their nightmares, despair. The world seen as a post-apocalyptic war zone so popular in today's movies. Yeats' lines apply: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity."

One thing is clear: as the end of the millenium approaches, we are headed for major change. We like to see hope of a brighter condition than we see in the works of Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Beckett, Ionesco, Orwell, and so on. Some say the end of a century brings pessimism, and the start of a century optimism. If so, the pendulum swing of 2000 could bring exaggerated waves of optimism. The gloom, or perceived gloom, of these manuscript pages may seem irrelevant. Whatever the case, the rhythms of life do seem to be intensifying in many ways. The mad symphony is playing faster. Heightening tempo is therefore the rhythm I chose for *Rat Hole*.

I did not want simply to add one more manuscript of alienated existentialism; yet I could not honestly avoid that stance as the starting point. So we begin in irons. It's a retrospective position: here's where we've been this past century or two; here's where some of us still are. Simon believes his existence is as fruitless as that of the average sperm which never meets an egg. But a wind comes up, then a storm. Despite the message of his brain, Simon is engaged in orgasmic experience. At least he is part of an offering of seed. That is in keeping with the sacrificial awareness of our Piscean era: offer your life that others may have life. Even if you go nowhere individually, you participate in the wider reproduction. Simon cannot escape that commandment which has regulated his father and embittered so many on their way to the grave. Perhaps he should not escape it. Perhaps it is his only means of propulsion into the new age when he will need to set aside his existentialist angst and live according to new dictates. If nothing else, he may sense the greater whole.

Sensing ahead -- across the postmodern divide, as Borgman puts it -- I attempted to benefit from some of the artistic awareness of the coming age in my approach. Clearly, *Rat Hole* is closer to modernism, existentialism and dirty realism than it is to the work of postmodernists; but I would argue that there is an important postmodern glue in the manuscript, however subtle.

Linda Hutcheon argues that "women's writing ... has led the way in the new explorations of borders and boundaries" and wonders "what effect feminism has had on male writers, perhaps without their being fully aware of it" (78). An important effect of feminist writing, she notes, has been this "challenging of conventional boundaries.... generic borders can be usefully trespassed" (82). She particularly refers to the borders between the novel and the short story and even poetry and fictional prose" (82). I was very conscious of wishing to approach these boundaries with *Rat Hole*; I enrolled in the 1983/84 offering of Creative Writing 584 specifically to work with a writer who crosses genres and extends the power of poetry. While writing *Rat Hole*, I found myself returning to poetry with new inspiration. Although *Rat Hole* may suggest poetry only in the sense of anti-poetry, I do know I composed this book as close to the source of poetry as that of fiction. *Rat Hole* does not overtly call upon the reader to make decisions about what is poetic, fictional, autobiographical and journalistic, but I feel it offers more choice in this direction than any other writing I have produced. In this way it draws from the current mood of postmodern consciousness. It embodies greater self-reflectivity than my previous work. Attention is more focused on the process of interaction with the reader than on producing a conventional resolved narrative.

I suggested there is a concern with female principles in the basic approach of *Rat Hole*. This may seem absurd when the world of this narrative presents themes of dirt and warfare so often associated with men's writing. Simon's mother dies when he is 14; his female friend kills herself, leaving Simon in a confused, guilt-ridden state. It seems to me inevitable that Simon inhabits the world he does, a world hostile to those values we consider female. The modernist project -- at one with patriarchy-- embodies this hostility. It takes its toll of men as well as of women. In some cases, the penalty can be worse for men. Girls must show pluck to be tomboys, but a boy behaving as a "girl" is still taboo in most places. That is a social fact of major significance. Male reality, however tough and dirty, is reality; therefore it can be won.

There is in this manuscript a yearning for the lost feminine. Solutions, however tentative, arise from women or feminine characteristics, including the feminine aspect of Jones Overcross and even of Simon himself. Storytelling is originally a female gift and form, a magical healing from the mythical days of matriarchy. *Rat Hole* is in one sense an interweaving of various stories, and the climax, the hope Simon has been seeking, comes as a story: a story recovered. All of this has a parallel to the recovery work performed by feminisms. Without wishing to overstate this aspect, I recommend the reader consider its relevance to any sense of redemption that may wait within the rat hole.

To end with a personal reflection, this is a different work for me. My past writing, though sometimes lyrical, tended toward humor, parody and plot, with far less attention to language. I regret the grim tone of *Rat Hole*, but the manuscript that emerged, that ended up writing itself to a large extent, seemed to require this bleak mood. I feel I have expressed an authentic element of place and time, as well as a sense of character united with poetic structure. While each reader may take something different from this manuscript, I feel it says something I wanted to say for several years but had not found the way. I am indebted to 584 for providing conditions that furthered this approach.

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